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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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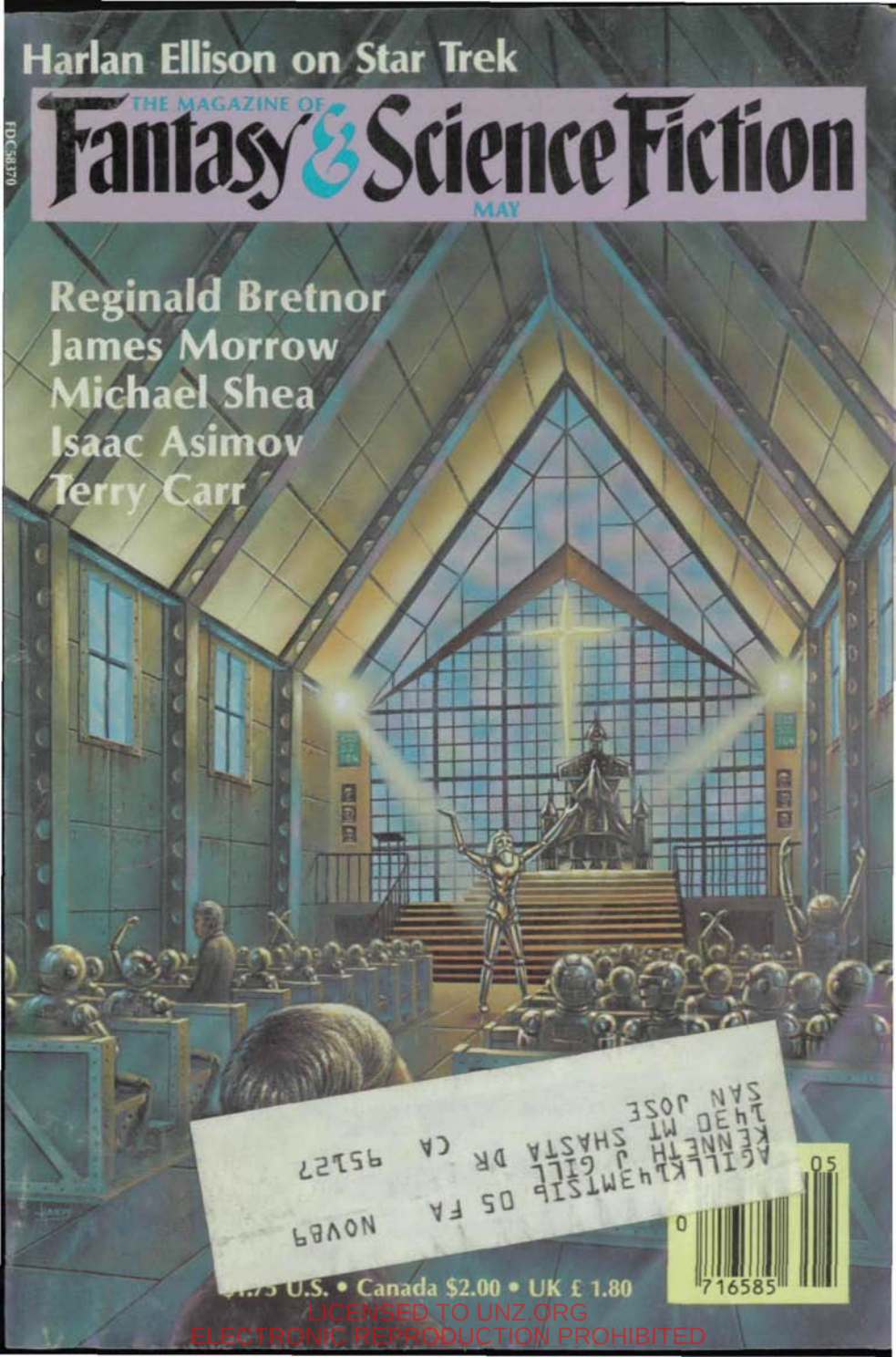

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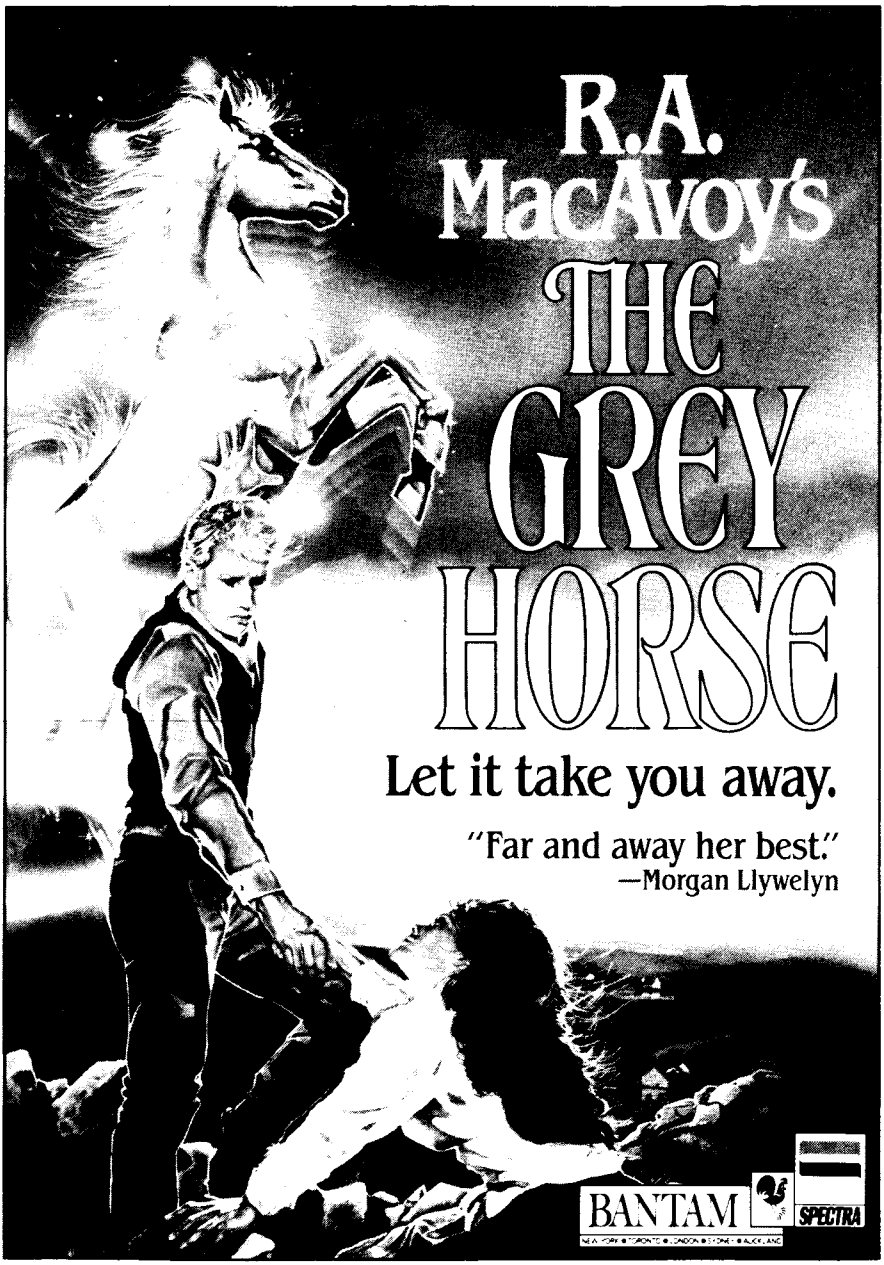

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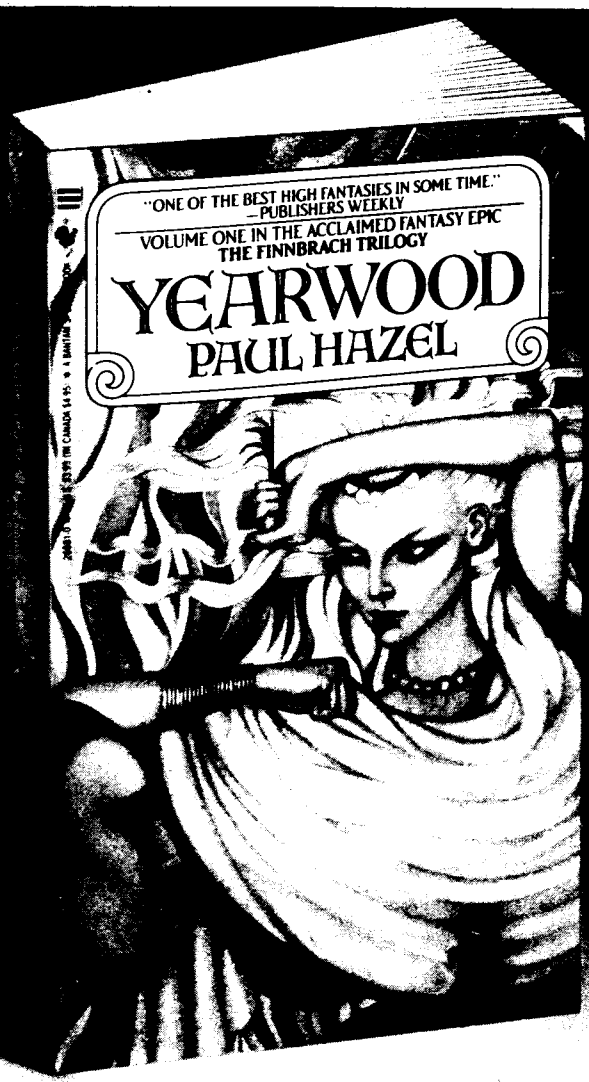
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James Morrow has authored a number of science fiction novels, the most recent of which is the nuclear war phantasmagoria, This Is the Way the World Ends *(Henry Holt and Co.). His short story, "The Assemblage of Kristin," has been optioned for production on the* Twilight Zone *television series. In "Spelling God With the Wrong Blocks," his first story for* F&SF, *he brings home the lesson that it is perhaps better if one avoids the topics of politics and religion in one's conversation. Especially the topic of religion.*

Spelling God with the Wrong Blocks

BY

JAMES MORROW

The world is not a prison-house but a kind of spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks.

—Edwin Arlington Robinson

1 July 2059

Procyon-5, Southwest Continent, Greenrivet University. The air here is like something you'd find inside a chain smoker's lungs, but no matter — we are still exultant from our success on Arcturus-9. In a mere two weeks, not only did Marcus and I disabuse the natives of their belief that one can cure infertility by carving large-breasted stone dolls, we also provided them with the rudiments of scientific medicine. I am confident that, upon returning to Arc-9, we shall find public hospitals, diagnostic centers, outpatient clinics, immunization programs. . . . The life of a science missionary may be unremunerative and harsh, but the spiritual rewards are great!

Our arrival at Greenrivet's space terminal entailed perhaps the most colorful welcome since H.M.S. *Bounty* sailed into Tahiti. The natives — androids every one of them — turned out en masse bearing gifts, including thick, fragrant leis that they ceremoniously lowered about our necks. Marcus is allergic to flowers of all species, but he bore his ordeal stoically. Even if he were not my twin brother, I would still regard him as the most dedicated and talented science missionary of our age. It's a fair guess that he'll go directly from this ministry to a full position at the Heuristic

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Institute — he has the stuff to become a truly legendary Archbishop of Geophysics.

Amid the shaving mugs and the neckties, one of the androids' gifts struck me as odd: a reprint of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* — the original 1859 version — hand-lettered on gold-leaf vellum and bound in embossed leather. After giving me the volume, a rusting and obsolete Model 205 pressed his palms together and raised his arms skyward, crossing them to form a metallic X. "'The innumerable species, genera, and families with which this world is peopled are all descended, each within its own class or group, from common parents,'" the robot recited. "The *Origin*, Fourteenth Chapter, Section Seven, Paragraph Four, Verse One."

"Thank you," I replied, though the decrepit creature seemed not to hear.

The president of Greenrivet University, Dr. Polycarp, is a Model 349 with teeth like barbed wire and blindingly bright eyes. He drove us from the spaceport in his private auto, then gave us a Cook's tour of the school, a clutch of hemisphere buildings rising like concrete igloos from the tarmac. In the faculty lounge we met Professor Hippolytus and Dean Tertullian. Polycarp and his colleagues *seem* rational enough. No doubt their minds are clogged with myths and superstitions that Marcus and I shall have to remove through the plumber's helper of logical positivism.

2 July 2059

What sort of culture might machine intelligence evolve in the absence of human intervention? Before the Great Economic Collapse, the sociobiology department of Harvard University became obsessed with this provocative question. They got a grant. And so Harvard created Greenrivet, populating it with Series 8000 androids and abandoning them to their own devices. . . .

Our cottage, which Dr. Polycarp insists on calling a house, is an unsightly pile of stone plopped down next to a marsh, host to mosquitoes and foul odors. But the breakfast nook overlooks a pleasant apple orchard and a vast flurry of wildflowers, and I can readily picture myself sitting peacefully at the table — planning lessons, grading papers, sipping tea, watching the wind ripple the blossoms. Poor Marcus and his allergy! Even though he is my twin — born five minutes before me — I have always thought of him as my little brother, ever in need of my sympathy and protection.

The housekeeper, Vetch, is a rotund Model 905 who insists on being called "Mistress," a title that flies in the face of the immutable sexlessness of Series 8000 androids. As I climbed down from the sleeping loft this

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morning, she — it — noticed my gift copy of *The Origin of Species* protruding from my coat. "So nice to be working for good, righteous, Darwin-fearing folk," she — it — remarked, making the X-gesture I had seen at the terminal. Whistling like a happy teapot, Mistress Vetch served our breakfast.

6 July 2059

First day of the summer term. Taught Knowledge 101 and Advanced Truth in a cramped lecture room reminiscent of a surgical theater. A particularly svelte and shiny Model 692 was sitting in the front row, grinning a silver grin. Why do I assume she is female? She is as bereft of gender as our housekeeper.

Her name is Miss Blandina.

We did a bit of Euclid, touched on topology. Everything went swimmingly — lots of six-digit hands shot up, followed by sharp questions, especially from Miss Blandina. These machines are fast learners; I'll give them that.

7 July 2059

No problems getting them to accept the First or the Second Law of Thermodynamics. On to the Third!

Marcus says this is the cushiest ministry we've ever had. I agree. Whenever Miss Blandina smiles, a warm shiver travels through my backbone.

9 July 2059

Everybody on the Greenrivet faculty seems to be some sort of selective breeding expert. We've got a Professor of Hybridism, a Professor of Mutation, an Embryology chair . . . weird. God knows what they were teaching around here before Marcus and I arrived.

As the Advanced Truth students filed out — I had just delivered a reasonably cogent account of general relativity — I asked Miss Blandina whether she had any more classes that day.

"Comparative Religion," she replied.

"And what religions are you comparing?"

"Agassizism and Lamarckism," came the answer. "Equally blasphemous," she added.

"I wouldn't call them religions."

She laid her plastic palm against my cheek and batted a fiberglass eyelash. "Come to church on Sunday."

10 July 2059

"How did you originate?" I asked the Advanced Truth class. You could have heard a rubber pin drop. "I'm

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serious," I continued. "Where do you come from? Who made you?"

"No one made us," said Miss Blandina. "We descended."

"Descended?" I said.

"Descent with modification!" piped up a Model 106 whose name I haven't learned yet.

"But from what did you descend?"

"Our ancestors," replied Mr. Valentinus.

"Where did you get *that* idea?"

"The testaments," said Miss Basilides.

"The Old Testament? The New Testament?"

"The First Testament of the prophet Darwin," said Mr. Heracleon. "*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life.*"

"And the Second Testament," said Miss Basilides. *"The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex."*

"'But natural selection, we shall see, is a power incessantly ready for action,'" Miss Blandina quoted animatedly. "The *Origin*, Third Chapter, Section One, Paragraph Two, Verse Nine."

"'Thus we can understand how it has come to pass that man and all other vertebrate animals have been constructed on the same general model,'" contributed Mr. Callistus. "The *Descent*, First Chapter, Section Five, Paragraph Two, Verse Nine." He made the X-gesture.

Numbed by confusion, I spent the rest of the class attempting to cover quantum electrodynamics.

11 July 2059

Dinner. For someone without a stomach, Mistress Vetch knows a great deal about food. Her shrimp scampi treats every human taste bud as a major erogenous zone.

Marcus and I discussed this Darwin the prophet business. "Brother Piers," he said, "at tomorrow's faculty meeting we must take the bullshit by the horns."

My twin is an unfortunate combination of delicate frame and indelicate mouth. Until we mastered the art of trading places, schoolyard bullies would send him to the emergency room on a regular basis; despite our matching genes, I do not have Marcus's fragile bones, so I survived the bullies intact. I suppose I should have resented the stuntman role. Probably I was willing to take the beatings because the things Marcus said to provoke them were always so extraordinarily true.

12 July 2059

The meeting started late, and we were the last item on the agenda, so everyone was pretty testy by the time Marcus got the floor.

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"Here's the problem," my brother began. "The vast majority of our students seem to believe that your race originated what the ancient naturalist Darwin called descent with modification."

Professor Hippolytus, one of our embryologists, loaded his pipe with magnesium. "You doubt Darwin's word?" he asked, his eyebrows arching skyward.

"Darwin was not referring to robots," said Marcus in the tone a ten-year-old girl uses to address her insufferable younger brother. "He was referring to living things," he added, smiling indulgently.

"Revealed truth is a rare and blessed gift," said Dr. Polycarp. "We are most fortunate that the testaments were handed down to us."

Marcus's smile collapsed. "The raw fact, Dr. Polycarp, is that you are *not* the result of descent with modification."

"Of course we are," replied Dr. Ignatius, the university's hybridism expert. "It's in the *Origin*."

"And the *Descent*." Professor Hippolytus puffed on his pipe, sending a white magnesium flame toward the ceiling.

"You are the result of special creation," I said. "Harvard University's sociobiology department made you. Each of you is a unique, separate, immutable product."

"'Natural selection will modify the structure of the young in relation to the parent, and of the parent in relation to the young,'" quoted Professor Hippolytus. Puff, puff. "The *Origin*, Fourth Chapter, Section One, Paragraph Eleven, Verse One."

"There!" said Marcus, instantaneously gaining his feet. "See what I mean? You don't *have* any young. You couldn't *possibly* be participating in natural selection."

"The divine plan is ever-unfolding," said Dean Tertullian. "We must have patience."

"I've never taken a shower with any of you" — Marcus's grin broadened as he laid his Aristotelian snare — "but I'd still bet the farm that you lack the prerequisites for breeding. Well . . . am I right? Am I?"

"Evolution takes time," said Professor Hippolytus. Puff. "Gobs of time. We'll get our prerequisites eventually."

"The Great Genital Coming," said Dr. Ignatius. "It's been foretold — read Darwin's word. 'With animals which have their sexes separated,'" he quoted, "'the males necessarily differ from the females in their organs of reproduction.' The *Descent*, Eighth Chapter, Section One, Paragraph One, Verse One."

"And until the Great Genital Coming occurs, we expect you to keep your theory of special creation out of our classrooms," said Dr. Polycarp.

"It's a foolish idea," said Dean Tertullian.

"Immoral," added Dr. Ignatius.

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"Illegal," concluded Professor Hippolytus, his magnesium flame shifting toward yellow.

"Illegal?" I said.

"Illegal," repeated Professor Hippolytus. Puff. "Public Act Volume 37, Statute Number 31428 makes it a crime to teach any theory of android descent contrary to the account given in *The Origin of Species*."

"A crime?" I said. My jaw swung open. "What sort of crime?"

"A *serious* crime," said Dr. Ignatius.

"This meeting is adjourned," Dr. Polycarp declared.

12 July 2059

Sunday. No classes. Rained cats and dogs and kittens and pups. We decided to take Miss Blandina's advice and attend church. As we started down Gregor Mendel Avenue, Marcus suddenly seized the pocket of my raincoat and steered me into a teleportation office. Pulling a sealed envelope from his vest, he arranged for it to materialize posthaste at the Heuristic Institute.

I glanced at the mailing address. "What do you want from Archbishop Clement?" Marcus did not answer. "I assume you know better than to mess around with that law," I said. "Public Act Volume . . . whatever." I am my brother's keeper, and one place I aim to keep him is out of jail.

"Is it not our duty as science missionaries to counter ignorance with knowledge, Piers?" Marcus asked rhetorically.

"A crime," I answered, nonrhetorically. "*Serious* crime — remember?"

Smiling, he guided me back to the soggy streets. I have always believed that, with his bravado and single-mindedness, my little brother will go far, though I am no longer sure in which direction.

Several hundred worshipers jammed the church to its steel walls. The front pew contained Miss Blandina, freshly polished and exuding a joie de vivre I had not realized her race could feel. The altar was a replica of H.M.S. *Beagle*, and the chancel niches contained frowning marble statues of Alfred Wallace, Charles Lyell, Herbert Spencer, J. D. Hooker, T. H. Huxley, and, of course, Darwin the supreme prophet.

The pastor, a Model 415 with a voice that seemed to reach us after first traveling through an elevator shaft, did a reading from the *Journal of the Voyage of the Beagle*, then raised his colossal head and shouted, "The one-celled animals begat . . ."

". . . the multicellular animals!" the congregation shouted back.

The pastor continued, "And the multicellular animals begat . . ."

". . . the worms!" responded the congregation.

"And the worms begat . . ."

". . . the fishes!"

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"And the fishes begat . . ."

". . . the lizards!"

"And the lizards begat . . ."

". . . the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

"And the beasts of the field begat . . ."

". . . the people!"

"And the people begat . . ."

". . . the androids!"

The pew nipped at my posterior. "What was in that letter, Marcus?" I asked, shifting.

"You'll find out."

"You're going to get us in trouble," I informed him.

13 July 2059

Rain, rain, go away. After breakfast — Mistress Vetch can make eggs and cheese interact in surprising and sensual ways — a drippy messenger arrived from the teleportation office bearing a large wooden crate.

To the collective horror of the messenger and Vetch, Marcus immediately ripped an endpaper from our copy of the *Origin* and, after scrawling a note, affixed the sacred sheaf to the crate, which he then ordered delivered to Dr. Polycarp's apartment.

"What's in the crate, Marcus?" I asked, expecting an answer no better than the one I got.

"Antidotes for illusion, Piers."

• • •

16 July 2059

Faculty meeting. Marcus's crate was the first item on the agenda.

"We've been studying these artifacts carefully," said Dr. Polycarp to my brother.

"Very carefully," said Dr. Ignatius.

Dr. Polycarp reached inside the crate, whose exalted position in the center of the table suggested that it might contain some priceless archaeological find — a crown perhaps, or a Canopic jar. When he withdrew his hand, however, it held nothing more impressive than a stack of blueprints and a few holograms.

"You have put together a compelling case for your theory of special creation," said Professor Hippolytus.

"A most compelling case," Dr. Ignatius added.

Marcus smirked like Houdon's statue of Voltaire.

"However," said Dr. Polycarp, "the case is not good enough."

Voltaire glowered.

"For example," explained Dean Tertullian, "while these holograms might indeed be used to shore up your theory, there is every reason to assume that the android assembly line they depict did *itself* evolve through natural selection."

Voltaire groaned.

"And while there are blueprints here for the Model 517, the Model 411, and the Model 973," noted Pro-

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fessor Hippolytus, "we can find nothing for the 604 or the 729. I, as it happens, am a 729." He slapped his chest, producing a hollow bong.

"In short," said Dr. Ignatius, "the blueprint record contains gaps."

"Big gaps," said Dr. Polycarp.

"*Damning* gaps," said Dean Tertullian.

"When all is said and done," concluded Professor Hippolytus, "natural selection remains a far more plausible explanation of our origins than does special creation."

"We appreciate your efforts, however." Dr. Polycarp curled his tubular fingers around my brother's shoulder. "Feel free to submit a reimbursement slip for your teleportation costs."

Marcus looked as if he were about to give birth to something large and malevolent. "I don't understand you creatures," he rasped.

A seraphic smile appeared on Dr. Polycarp's face, accompanied by chortles from the corners of his mouth. "Reading Darwin's word," he said, "I am overcome with gratitude for the miracle of chance that has brought me into being. The *Origin* teaches that life is a brotherhood of species, linked by wondrous genetic strings."

"You science missionaries propose to deny us that sacred heritage." With unmitigated contempt, Professor Hippolytus tossed the Model 346 blueprint back into the crate. "You say that we exist at the behest of Harvard University, that we were dreamed up by a bunch of sociobiologists for reasons known only to themselves."

"When we hear this," said Dean Tertullian, "we feel all purpose and worth slip from our souls like the husk of a molting insect."

"No, no, you're wrong," said Marcus. "To be a child of Harvard is a glorious condition—"

"We've got a lot to cover this afternoon," said Professor Hippolytus, whistling through his empty pipe.

My twin failed to stifle a sneer.

"Item Two." Dr. Polycarp placed a check mark on his agenda. "Improvements in the Faculty Massage Parlor."

17 July 2059

In the middle of our living room sits the crate, which I have nailed shut like the lid of a coffin. We use it as a tea table.

Marcus broods constantly. Instead of talking to me, he quotes Herbert Spencer: "There is no infidelity to compare with the fear that the truth will be bad."

18 July 2059

I hate this planet.

21 July 2059

Coming down to breakfast, I no-

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ticed that the top of the crate had been pried up. Most of the blueprints and holograms were missing.

In the afternoon I lectured on supergravity, but my mind wandered . . . to Room 329, Marcus's class. What was going on there? Spasms of fear ticked off the passing minutes. My students — even Miss Blandina — looked hostile, predatory, like a phalanx of cats creeping toward an aviary.

It was well past midnight when my twin stumbled into the cottage, a ragged smile wandering across his face. His arms clutched the evidence for special creation. Liquor sweetened his breath and seeped through his brain.

"I reached them!" he said, fighting to keep his words from melting together. Lovingly he returned the evidence to its crate. "They listened! Asked questions! Understood! Rationality is a miraculous thing, Piers!"

22 July 2059

My sweaty fingers suck at the computer keys. . . .

The mob appeared at dawn, two dozen androids wearing black sheets and leather masks. Hauling Marcus from his bed, they dragged him kicking and cursing to the orchard. I begged them to take me instead. A rope appeared. The tree to which they attached him looked like the inverted talon of a gigantic vulture.

Mistress Vetch splashed gasoline across my little brother's shivering form. Someone struck a match. A hooded android with an empty magnesium pipe jutting from his mouth made the X-gesture and read aloud Public Act Volume 37, Statute Number 31428 in its entirety. Marcus began shouting about the blueprint record. As the flames enclosed him, his screams ripped through the gloom and into my spine. I rushed forward through the smoke-borne stench, amid a noise suggestive of jackboots stomping on rotten fruit; such is the sound of exploding organs.

What remained after an hour — a bag of wet, fleshy rubble that would never become an Archbishop of Geophysics — did not invite burial, merely disposal.

30 July 2059

The natural state of the universe is darkness.

3 August 2059

I entered Advanced Truth several minutes late, my briefcase swinging at the end of my arm like the bob of a pendulum. The assembled students were hushed, respectful.

Mr.Valentinus leaned forward. Mr. Callistus looked curious. Miss Basilides seemed eager to learn.

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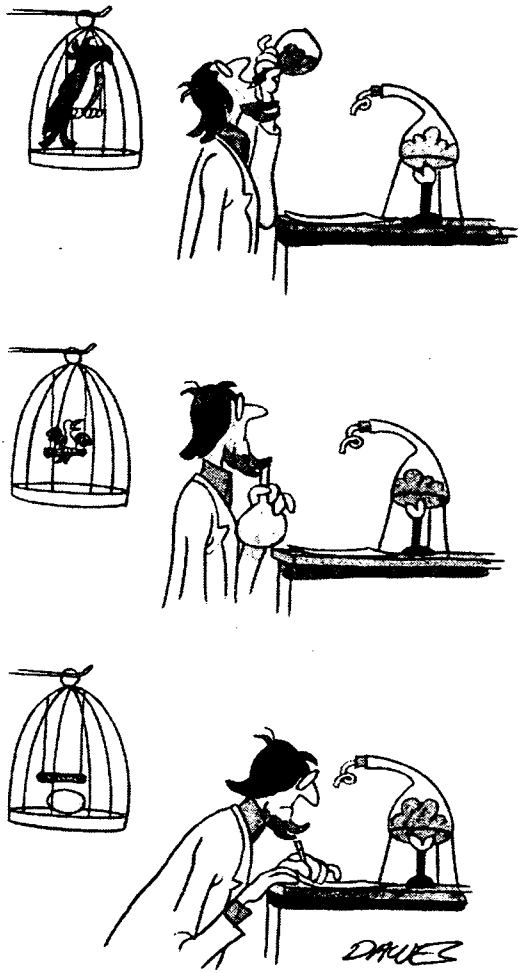
If there's one thing I love, it's teaching.

I opened the briefcase and spread the contents across the desk. My bloodshot eyes sought out Miss Blandina. We exchanged smiles.

"Today," I said, "we'll be looking at some blueprints. . . ."



"Youth elixir a failure."

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One of science fiction's foremost editors is also, on rare occasions, a short-story writer; here is a delightful example, a short and surprising variation on a classic theme.

You Got It

BY
TERRY CARR

"You got three wishes," said the small man with the big nose.

Ready Eddie looked at him with narrowed eyes. "You don't look like a djinn."

"Oh fachrissake. I'm not a djinn. Not an elf or enchanted prince either." He pointed to his card in Ready Eddie's hand. "Alternative Worlds, Ltd. — market research. New technique we got. Patent pending."

"You mean I make three wishes, and you change the world to one where they come true?"

"You got it. Anything that's possible anywhere, you get."

"You mean I can't be Heavyweight Champion because I'm only five foot three?"

"Yeah. And you can't be a great poet if you aren't a sensitive person to start with. You get the best of all *possible* worlds. I'm no magician, fergodsake." The small man glanced at his watch. "Hurry up. I gotta cover this whole neighborhood by noon."

Ready Eddie prided himself on his quickness of mind; he never got suckered into anything. He was quick, he was careful, and his life was dull. "I won't lose my immortal soul or anything?" he asked.

"Who'd want it? Christ, I hate this job."

"I hate mine, too," said Eddie. "I sell vacuum cleaners door to door. Boring. My first wish is to have a job where I meet interesting people every day."

The small man made a notation. "O.K. Not fancy or too vague — you got it. What else?"

Ready Eddie thought of his lady friend Gertrude, who was thick in her middle and thin in her head. But she was the only woman who had

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ever looked at him. "I want the most beautiful and fascinating woman possible to be in love with me."

"Right. You got it. Finally?"

Eddie didn't want to confine his wishes *too* much. "I want to live in a world that's really the best it can possibly be — where space travel makes economic sense, cancer can be cured, and there doesn't have to be an energy problem. Is all that O.K.?"

The small man made another note. "Good as any of them." He consulted a notebook full of tables, then punched a short series of numbers on what looked like a pocket calculator. "O.K., you got it." He started for the door.

The phone rang. Eddie answered it, and Gertrude said, "Hi, sweetiekins, this is the love of your life."

Eddie covered the phone with his hand. "Wait a minute," he said. "When does all this stuff start? — the best of worlds and everything?"

The small man sighed wearily. "It already did. I told you, the best of all *possible* worlds. You got it, pal."

He went out the door. "Christ I hate this job," he muttered. "I'd sure get a different one if I could."

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We all carry with us a certain nostalgia for past films and filmstars. Brad Strickland ("In the Hour Before Dawn," August 1986) writes, "I think 'Oh Tin Man, Tin Man. . .' will either please or enrage any reader who is also a movie buff."

Oh Tin Man, Tin Man, There's No Place Like Home

BY
BRAD STRICKLAND

It's 5:30 in the morning as I write this, and *Singin' in the Rain* is on my TV. Gene Kelly, to my vast relief, dances on his street awash with rain, just as I remembered him doing. So in a minute I'll eject the tape and try another, as soon as these notes are done. The notes have to be done first. In the Antarctic, explorers used to leave bamboo poles stuck in the snow every hundred yards, each flying a small pennant and marking the way back. My notes are pennants, flying in the crazy wind; this is my way back. Please God, it's my way back.

When did it start? The lightning bolt started it, but was it a lightning bolt? Or did the bald little man start it two weeks ago when he sold me the descrambler? "Just what you need," he said, standing on my doorstep, his nondescript, unmarked, olive-drab panel truck behind him. "I saw your satellite dish, and I said to myself, those folks need a descrambler. Only twenty-five bucks, and you get *all* the channels, know what I mean?"

Edith was against it, but Edith has been against a great many things lately. She wants to work; I want her to stay home with Billy and Erin. Maybe she's right — maybe we need the money. When we married, thirty thousand a year seemed like a fortune to us, a salary I'd probably never make. I hit that four years ago, and still we have to count every penny, and still every major purchase, like the satellite dish, is a crisis, and every minor one, like the descrambler, is an occasion for tears.

This is turning out wrong. There are things I should be remembering here.

First: I've waited for four years to

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be promoted to managing editor of *Entertainment Week,* the magazine-sized supplement to the metropolitan paper. Not much paper. Not much of a promotion, some might say (Edith scoffed at my perseverance; she wanted me to take any one of half a dozen higher-paying reportorial jobs offered me while I waited); but I've always been a movie buff, and writing about movies — what makes them good, what makes them terrible — is the kind of writing I most love to do.

Second: Edith was mollified, I think, by the news that I'd get the editorial desk. That happened three months ago, after Reynolds decided that, at sixty-eight, he'd simply had it. Reynolds had been at the paper forever, and the transition time was awkward — not the least because I began doing most of his work while still on my old salary. But it was Edith who made the graceful suggestion that I take two weeks' vacation just before Reynolds left the paper for good. That was perfect; it gave me a rest and gave him a chance to show, one last time, that he could get out an issue of *EW* without any help from the young usurper.

Third: We had said some hard things to each other, Edith and I, in the past few months. So I wasn't surprised when she suggested the kids might like a week in the country, at her folks' farm. It sounded like a good idea. Next year, Billy will be in school, and these spur-of-the-moment jaunts will be impossible. Then, too, Edith and I needed a little time apart. Not too much, of course; just enough to reconsider some of the terrible things we said, not really meaning them. Just enough to miss each other and want to come together again.

So on Saturday I put Edith and the kids in the car, leaned in through the open driver's window to kiss her good-bye, and watched her drive away. She was keenly conscious — I could tell — that I had somehow "won" by gaining the promotion. As she turned the Sentra out into the street and drove away, I felt how fragile we were just then, how much I needed to succeed at the new job, how much I needed to keep us, all of us, together.

But I could do it. Movies were my first love. That was why, back on a dark day two weeks back, I had bought the descrambler and had attached it to the big white satellite antenna in the backyard. After Edith had gone, in fact, I thought fleetingly of relaxing in the recliner and checking out the hundreds of channels.

Duty called, though. First the lawn, not really growing yet but rank in a few places with tussocks of early grass, ragged and untidy, needed some attention. I hauled the mower out, filled its tank, and cranked it to life.

The spring afternoon was lost in low gray clouds that pressed down on the earth and made me uneasy and nervous. They trapped the unseason-

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able heat and the humidity. In the denser patches of lawn, the mown grass came out clumped from the mower. I finished the front lawn and moved around to the rear. Higgins, two houses up, was doing the same thing for his cedar-sided, split-level domain, the two of us blatting a gasoline-voiced duet to the rest of the neighborhood. Down the street three houses, Macrone labored away at his new barbecue pit, laying course on course of brick like a kid trying to build the highest pile of blocks in the room.

Everything went fine until I mowed the patch in front of the satellite dish. Then I heard it.

No, I *felt* it. The mower would have drowned out any sound; yet it was like a sound, low, humming in the bones. I killed the motor and listened. The whole dish seemed to turn out a low note, just below the threshold of hearing. I stood there with the mown-hay sweetness of cut clover in my nose, and I felt in my bones the vibration. I put out my hand and touched the rim of the dish.

The world dissolved into blue-white light. I wasn't *there* anymore. I wasn't anywhere.

Thunder? I don't recall thunder. Just that shattering blue-hot nothing, that burning annihilation.

Then it passed, and I stood with my hand on the now silent dish. Higgins made a right-angle turn and guided his mower parallel to his house. Macrone slapped mortar onto a row of bricks and spread it like butter on toast.

An hour later — to me it seemed an hour, anyway — Higgins took the next step in his mowing, Macrone smoothed the mortar over the bricks, and I drew the breath my body had been screaming for.

What do you do when you've been struck by lightning? First you go inside — shakily — and up to the bathroom. Then you strip and see if everything's still there, because you're numb from crown to sole. Then you thank God, silently, and aloud you say the *hell* with the lawn. Next you fall naked into bed and sleep from 2:12 P.M. right through to 8:40 that evening.

I woke up hungry, thirsty. I pulled on jeans and an undershirt, went down to the fridge, popped the top of a beer, and took care of the thirst. Then I opened another beer, rescued the two leftover pork chops from yesterday's dinner, and ate standing at the counter. There are little advantages to living on your own for a week. After a week they might become a curse, but for the first seven days they're advantages.

It's funny, but standing there at the counter, munching on cold pork chops and washing them down with gulps of beer, I decided that this wasn't at all what I wanted. Not at all.

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If Edith wanted to work, well, the kids were old enough now, Billy six and Erin five, not to miss her so much. Both of them were good kids, thanks to Edith, not to me. And more than anything else, I wanted never to *have* to stand at a counter, making a meal of cold meat and beer. I looked at the calendar stuck to the refrigerator. This was the fourteenth. In a week, Edith would be home again. In a little more than two weeks, I'd have to be back at my new desk at the paper. But in the meantime, in those eight days, we'd clear away a lot of the past, make a new start. I felt good.

Then I decided to see what was on television, what my dish and descrambler could bring me. Maybe a rerun of a favorite movie, or maybe a look at one that we couldn't make time to see when it was in the theaters six months back. Settling into the recliner, I reached for the remote control. Just at the moment when the set came on, something acrid and unpleasant whiffed in my nostrils, something redolent of scorched wires and burning plastic. I sniffed the remote control, but it smelled clean. After a moment the odor went away, and, with a shrug, I began to watch TV. Purposely neglecting to check any of the guides, I let my sense of adventure take me on a tour of ninety-odd channels.

I nearly stopped on seven, to revisit Oz in one of its annual manifestations. The Tin Man danced clankily on the yellow brick road, while Dorothy and the Scarecrow stood under the eaves of the forest whispering together, the green roof of the Woodsman's cottage behind them, not yet occupied by a Wicked Witch ready to play ball. I was tempted to join the pilgrims to the Emerald City, but they were well along the road already, so I shifted up the scale to eight (four sobersides discussing the future of education), nine (music videos insulting to the eye and deafening to the ear), ten (a TV movie about a woman who felt trapped in her profession as a Supreme Court justice and who secretly carved out a second career for herself as a masked rock singer), and on and on, with something nagging at me all the while.

Something was wrong. Something tickled my brain. I dialed back to seven.

Lions and tigers and bears.

Something about the voice, the Tin Man's voice, the timbre of it. I bent close to the screen.

Bert Lahr bounded around the bole of a tree, knocking the travelers over like ninepins. "Wurr-ufff!" he snarled, like a Teddy Bear come to life. "Put 'em up. Put 'em a-h-h-hp!"

What *was* there about the Tin Man? Something around the eyes, red-rimmed in sharp relief against the aluminum makeup. "Why don't you get up and teach him a lesson?" he asked, and his voice seemed strange. I watched as the four sorted

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themselves out, as Lahr sang about needing the noive, and as they all set off for Oz again, heading for the poppy field and the witch's revenge. Margaret Hamilton cackled "Poppies — poppies!" in a way that still ran shivers down my back. Sure enough, the poppies bloomed and stopped the Lion, Dorothy, and Toto in their tracks, within sight of the inverted green domes and test tubes of the Emerald City.

And when the Tin Man cried, rusting himself again, I got it: no wonder the Tin Man looked a little strange. It was Buddy Ebsen.

Huh, I thought. Outtakes from the first version, the one Ebsen had to leave because he developed a lung ailment from the aluminum dust. I wonder where they dug this up.

But it went on. The snow rescued the travelers, they gained admission to the Emerald City from Frank Morgan, rode a carriage pulled by the horse of a different color, were terrorized by the skywritten message to "Surrender Dorothy," and finally got in to see —

W. C. Fields.

W. C. Fields.

The part of the Wizard was played by W. C. Fields, who had turned it down, who had never been photographed in makeup or costume for the part, who had rejected it when the movie was still just a script.

I went to the bookshelf and found Tucker Austin's *VideoMovies*, one of my handy reference guides. There the review was, on page 1001:

Wizard of Oz, The (1939 — b&w, c). 101 m. D: Victor Fleming.

Judy Garland, W. C. Fields, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, Buddy Ebsen, Billie Burke, Margaret Hamilton, Frank Morgan, Clara Blandick, the Singer Midgets.

Fields glows as a very good man but a very poor Wizard in this classic musical version of L. Frank Baum's American fairy tale. Garland's "Over the Rainbow" became her musical signature for the rest of her life, and the Arlen-Harburg score is a marvelous match for the colorful worlds of Oz. Not to be missed by kids or adults — perfectly cast, perfectly acted, a gem.

It was flatly impossible. I watched the whole movie, saw the sonorous Fields award a diploma, a medal inscribed "Courage," and a heart-shaped watch ("Always remember, my sentimental frien-n-n-d," rasped the well-known Fieldsian voice, "that a heart is not measu-r-r-red . . . by how much *you* love — but by how much you *are* loved — by others"). I saw him launch his balloon — "Can't come back . . . I dunno how it works!" — and saw Dorothy return to Kansas, where Frank Morgan played Uncle Henry, and Ebsen was Hickory, one of the three farmhands who, with the aunt and un-

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cle, clustered around the bed. Fields, as Professor Marvel, stuck his head in at the window, Dorothy assured them all that there was no place like home, and the movie ended.

The telephone was already in my hand. I got an assistant at the TV station who talked to me for a minute and a half before hanging up under the impression that I was loony. Then I called Dwight Simmons, who taught in the communicative arts department of the city university and who was the only Trivial Pursuit player in the city who gave me a run for my money on the entertainment questions. Dwight answered on the second ring.

"Quick," I said. "Who played the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz?*"

"Buddy Ebsen," Dwight said immediately. "Who the hell is this?"

After a long breath, I said, "Jeff Martin."

He laughed. "Were you trying to refer to the 1910 version? Because in that one, the Tin Man was —"

"No, the '39 version. Dwight, what do you know about Jack Haley and *The Wizard of Oz?*"

Simmon's voice was surprised. "Haley? He had nothing to do with it, far as I know. He was in *GWTW* that year, and —"

"Haley? Jack Haley?"

"What is this, a joke? Jeff Martin doesn't remember that Jack Haley played the Union guard who's in the poker game with Rhett and who escorts Scarlett back to see him? Come on, what are you up to?"

"Nothing," I said. "Good-bye, Dwight."

My hands were shaking as I got down the double-tape set of *Gone With the Wind.* When the Tarleton twins (one of them definitely a pre-Superman George Reeves) stepped aside to reveal Bette Davis as Scarlett, I heard myself sob. Using the fast-forward scan, I went through the whole movie in less than an hour. The main cast seemed the same as I remembered it, except for Scarlett — Clark Gable as Rhett (but there never had been any other serious contenders for that role), Olivia de Havilland as Melanie, Leslie Howard as Ashley, Thomas Mitchell, Hattie McDaniel, Butterfly McQueen — even Eddie Anderson, released from his role as Jack Benny's factotum, Rochester, chased a scruffy, bedraggled rooster through the rain just as he should have.

But the Yankee in the livery stable *was* Haley, sure enough.

My movie books agreed with what I saw, not what I remembered. By now I was shaking all over. I started checking what the books said about other movies.

Citizen Kane, Orson Welles . . . good. *Duck Soup,* the five Marx Brothers. Five? But Gummo had quit the team before their first movie! At least, in the world I remembered, he had.

But what really stopped me cold was *The Sands of Iwo Jima.* It didn't exist.

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Not in Austin's book, nor in Maltin's, nor in any of the half a dozen others on my shelves. In its place was one I didn't like the sound of at all:

Sands of Oahu, The (1946 — b&w) 119 m. D: Allan Dwan.

John Wayne, John Agar, Adele Mara, Forrest Tucker, Arthur Franz, Julie Bishop, Richard Jaeckel, Charlie Ruggles.

Not a bad war flick, and something of a curiosity. It flopped in its original release because the Pacific Peace Accords with Japan were signed the same month, but Wayne's patriotic portrayal of a hard-bitten Marine fighting in the desperate last-ditch stand on the Hawaiians can be seen in better perspective today. Ruggles surprisingly effective as a school principal who elected to remain behind when American civilians evacuated the islands.

That sent me hunting for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. It wasn't in my books. But *Hitler* (1962) was, and one of my books told me the movie was a cerebral retelling of Hitler's rise to power and his fall when the European War ended.

The European War. That turned out to be the title of a movie, too. It starred mostly nonentities, was made in 1950 in black and white, and told "the story of the successful battle of the Allies against Germany, ending with the death of Hitler." There was no movie on the Pacific War, but *Pacific* (1956 — French) was about "the efforts of Hawaiian Islanders, with help from the occupying Japanese, to rebuild a way of life. A sensitive documentary."

I needed air. I slipped my bare feet into deck shoes and walked out into the night. It had rained, and the pavement was still shiny-wet, the air unseasonably muggy, sluggish in the nostrils like steam, lying heavy as wet cotton in the lungs.

Without intending to, I walked to the shopping center a mile from my suburban home. The supermarket glared its light in cold swatches of fluorescent white and warmer streaks of neon red across the wet asphalt parking lot, gleaming in a million water drops on the tops of the parked cars. The supermarket was open all night, as was the pharmacy next to it. As was Fat Phil's.

Fat Phil is one of those entrepreneurs who have benefited from the electronic revolution. A couple of years back, Phil leased an empty storefront — not this one, a much smaller one down at the end of the shopping center, now a card and gift shop — and bought a couple of hundred videotapes, which he proceeded to rent out at two bucks each per day. Since then, Phil has grown fatter and the store larger. The video store now occupied what once had been a chain hardware store, and from the bustle inside, from the constantly narrowing

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aisles between the shelves of tapes, you could tell it would be moving to larger quarters any day now.

I walked across the lot to Fat Phil's. Outside his door, I paused to read the headline on a newspaper in the rack. Somebody had just vowed to veto the budget Congress was sending him.

Somebody I had never heard of.

I pushed through the door, passing a family of four on the way out with a stack of Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse evenly divided between the girl and the boy. The first shelves to the left were classics, and they were the least rented. There I found breathing space. I also found *Casablanca.*

Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan starred in it, according to the box. It became Reagan's first hit, the box told me, at the time of its first release. On the box front, in a sepia-toned still, Reagan looked very handsome, very American in a white dinner jacket. I took the box. I had to see *Casablanca.*

In an hour I collected more than a dozen tapes that I had to see, from most of the racks in the store. The horror movies I left alone — the titles and covers jarred me more than anything else had done so far. Something had gone very wrong and very nasty with the horror-film industry around 1955, if these covers accurately hinted at the contents of the movies.

Fast Phil, looking sort of like an early Chuck Jones Porky Pig with hair, got to me after I had stood in line for ten minutes. "Busy night tonight, Mr. Martin,' he said, his meaty hands flicking numbers on the register as his harried fourteen-year-old son hurried to get my movies from the back. He had to put them in a shopping bag at last, there were so many of them. Phil toted up the rentals and the taxes. "Hunnert fifty-four, Mr. Martin."

A hundred and fifty-four dollars. My wallet held nowhere near that much — or did it? When I checked, the twenty-odd dollars that should have been there had somehow multiplied into a thick wad of strange-looking gray bills. But my bank card looked the same as it always had. I passed him the plastic, and Phil ran the card through the imprinter. Only when I signed the slip did I notice the strange symbol: *TOTAL: N$ 154.00*
"What's this, Phil?" I asked.

Phil looked down without bending. "That's the right amount, Mr. Martin. Hunnert-forty for the movies, plus fourteen tax —"

"No, the symbol."

"New dollars? Christ, you remember before we had the devaluation, don't you? Ah, those Japs and their damn reparations. What can you do, right?"

Somebody behind was clamoring for Phil's attention, so I took my card and my bag and walked out into the night. I almost bought a paper, just to see who Somebody was and why he was vetoeing the budget, but, like the

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Cowardly Lion, I simply lacked the nerve.

It was 10:30 when I got back home. First I put on *Casablanca.* The story was almost the same, not quite but almost, and I cried a little watching it. I missed Claude Rains and Peter Lorre, and most of all, Dooley Wilson. The guy they had just wasn't as good. And Laszlo died in the last reel, shielding Ann Sheridan from Major Strasser's bullet, but Rick picked off the major. Then he and Ann boarded the plane together to carry on the fight against fascism. . . . It wasn't the same.

But God bless Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. They and all the old familiar faces waited for high noon — Thomas Mitchell was the mayor; Lon Chaney, Jr., the aged sheriff with arthritis and busted knuckles; Lloyd Bridges the callow deputy.

The Hitchcocks seemed the same in two out of three cases: *Rear Window,* Kelly again and Jimmy Stewart, and Thelma Ritter making sanguinary jokes about the supposed murder done by Raymond Burr. *North by Northwest* still began with Hitch missing a bus. But what really surprised me was the Hitchcock *Casino Royale,* done the year after *North by Northwest.* It was a bit of a shock to encounter Cary Grant as a debonair, lighthearted James Bond, but Leo G. Carroll fit the part of M. as though born to play it, and Grace Kelly (in her "royal return to the screen," as one of my reference books put it) sparkled with an icy charm that hinted at hidden, smoldering dimensions. I liked, too, Robert Morley's droll Le Chiffre — cultured villainy, with a streak of cruelty just below the surface. Hitch? He could be glimpsed in a traveling shot, as Grant walked through the casino. The deadpan director sat at a roulette table, calmly looking down as a scowling croupier shoved chips worth hundreds of thousands of francs over to him. *Video-Movies* gave it three and a half stars and noted, "the later Sean Connery Bonds are often more exciting, but the touch of the master makes this one a standout for humor, suspense, and sly menace."

More movies followed, as fast as I could scan them, linger over a remembered scene — or worse, one totally new to me — and consult my books. At three o'clock I called Fat Phil's. Phil, who never seemed to sleep, answered genially enough.

"Phil," I said, "have you heard of anybody in town selling descramblers for satellite dishes?"

After a momentary pause, Phil said, "Mr. Martin, if you really wanna know, I got a friend who can fix you up —"

"Little guy, bald, drives a panel truck?"

A longer pause. "Ah, naw. Naw, I was thinking of my cousin, runs an electronics supply house. But that guy you mentioned, yeah, he was around here a week, ten days ago.

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Wanted my customer list. Lissen, Mr. Martin, you stay away from that guy. Door-to-door crooks like that, they're out to take you."

"Thanks," I said. I looked at the descrambler perched so innocently on the shelf beside the VCR. After a moment I went out to the garage and came back with a set of screwdrivers.

It took only a few seconds to discover the source of the sharp, acrid odor I had noticed earlier that evening. The insides of the descrambler box were fused, charred, blackened, a mess. Maybe an electronics expert could fathom what the cinders once had been, but not I. Still, I put the box back together again, very carefully, and stored it on the top shelf of my bedroom closet. If that thing had changed the world — or if it had somehow changed me — there was at least a chance that it could change things back.

That was about the time that it struck me: in less than two weeks; I would be the editor of *Entertainment Week,* a magazine with a circulation of nearly 2 million. My job would depend on my expertise about, among other things, movies.

I knew nothing about a third or more of the movies I had checked out. Who had ever heard of *Chicago Kills* with Bogart and Cagney, or of *To Love Again Tomorrow* with Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier, or —

Just thinking about them turned me cold. And then I thought about Edith, Billy and Erin. What would happen if I couldn't swing it, if someone at work decided I was nuts? And how could I not be nuts if I didn't even know who was vetoing budgets these days?

The rest of Sunday morning is a blur. I watched more films, became appalled at how brutal the portrayal of law and order turned in the early sixties, grew ill at the cruel humor directed against women, blacks, and Chicanos in comedies of the mid-seventies, and found myself increasingly uneasy at the jingoistic undertones of hits from just last year. I don't remember falling asleep Sunday, but I did, sometime before noon, and I woke up late at night. Again I walked to Fat Phil's, and this time I checked out two hundred dollars' worth of movies. Two hundred *new* dollars' worth.

Monday afternoon I called Phil again, got his cousin's name. I borrowed Higgin's station wagon and drove the descrambler over.

I didn't like the ways the city had changed over the weekend. Buildings I remembered as new, or at least as showing new facades, seemed relics of the thirties or even earlier. The city was dirty enough before, God knows, but this time, all around, there was a dispirited sort of grayness, a kind of underlying decay that reached even to the trees in the parks — fewer trees, too, and meaner-spirited

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parks, with no playground equipment aside from a few rusty swings, one or two home-fashioned wooden teeter-totters. And close to the airport the sound of airplanes penetrated the station wagon's closed windows, the droning roar of prop planes. I saw two or three of them. What they were I don't know, but none were 747s. None were jets, for that matter.

In the heart of the city, I found a parking place a block from the address Phil had given me, between an ancient but well-tended Ford and a shiny new red Japanese car. At least it looked Japanese; I didn't recognize the model name, at least not as the name of a car — the Hero.

With no real trouble, I found the red-brick electronics place. Phil's cousin was one of those scrawny types with acne and thick glasses, the type who nowadays is always the first one killed when the hero of a movie decides the town is overrun with freaks. But he seemed to know his stuff, and it took him only a few minutes to open up and empty the cabinet, to sort among the debris. Finally he looked up, bafflement showing on his face. "Sorry, mister," he said. "Some of the stuff in this box — it's stuff that doesn't even *exist*, as far as I know. Where did you get it, anyway?"

"Never mind," I said, and took the descrambler away in a cardboard box.

On the way home through the unfamiliar city, through *my* city, I thought long and hard. Something terrible had happened, something per-

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haps irrevocable. If I could find the little bald man and his green panel truck — but how do you do that? Take an ad in the paper? That would be easy for me.

But what if he didn't show up? What would I do then?

I decided just as I neared the shopping center. I pulled in and rented more movies from Fat Phil.

It's Tuesday now, and I haven't slept more than two hours since Sunday evening. I have thirteen days, or nearly thirteen, before I have to sit in the editor's chair of *Entertainment Week*. Thirteen days isn't a long time. You can't read too many books in thirteen days.

But if you sleep as little as possible, you can see a hell of a lot of movies. And I'm learning what our movies have to teach. They teach more than we realize about attitudes, aspirations, directions — about what makes a man smart, or kind, or brave. And from the way those men are treated, you can learn a lot about the society, too, about where we've gone, where we are now. So for the next thirteen days, I'll drink coffee, watch movies, and learn. I'll call Edith and tell her to extend her stay another week, and all alone I'll watch movies.

Despite the temptation to turn off the recorder, I'll keep it on. No "TV." Just movies and nothing but movies.

Because, God help me, I'm afraid to watch the news.

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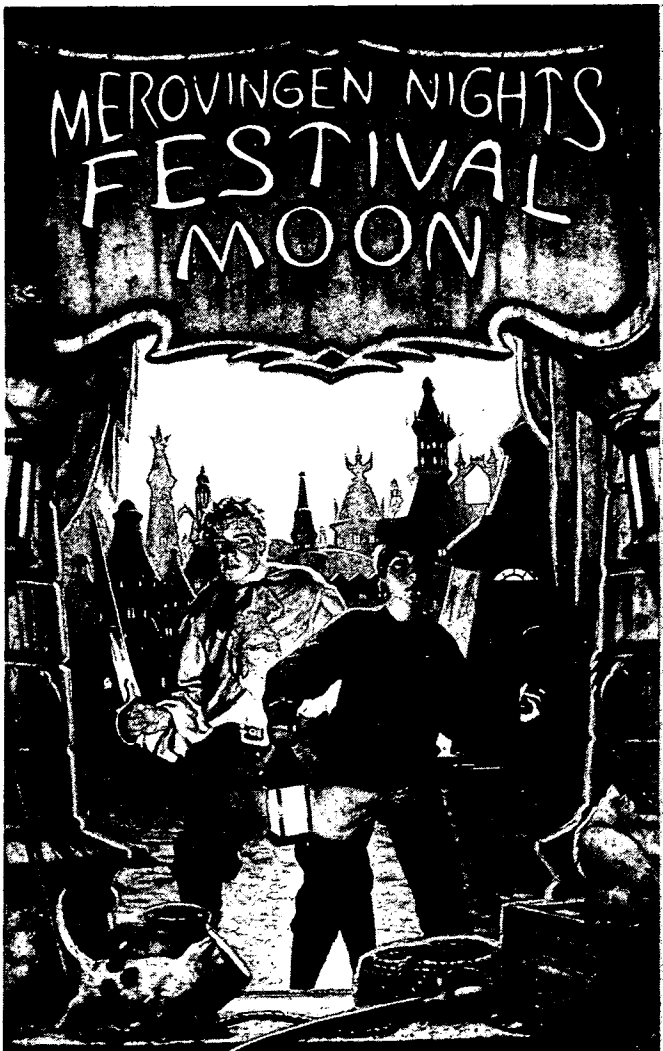

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The Glass Hammer, K.W. Jeter, Signet, $2.95

Worlds of If, Frederik Pohl, Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, eds., Bluejay Books, $19.95; $10.95 in trade paper

Science Fiction in Print: 1985, Charles N. Brown, William G. Contento, eds., Locus Press, P.O. Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661, $29.95 + $2.00 postage

J.T. McIntosh, Memoir and Bibliography. Ian Covell, ed., Drumm Booklet #25, Chris Drumm, Books, P.O. Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226, $2.00; Signed: $5.00

In some quarters — certainly in this one — K.W. Jeter is a figure of some mystery and legend. The story is that he was an associate, admirer and apprentice of Philip K. Dick, and the aura is of someone who is not particulary wedded to the grand old traditions of the field. Dick — as you will see if you read his memoir in *Worlds of* If, or if you know much about him from some other source, evolved toward a positive separation from the SF traditions that had initiated his career. Someone heavily attracted to Dick's late-life work and thought would have to be someone prepared to be only lightly engaged with the traditional SF community. Also, despite the fact that Jeter's first-published novel, the outré and dedicatedly antiestablishmentarian *Dr. Adder*, was reputedly quite old before it saw mass print a couple of years ago, he remains perhaps the only writer under sixty who hasn't staked

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a formal claim to having foreshadowed Cyperpunk.

He never to my knowledge even appears on any of the SF convention panels where Cyberpunk writing is discussed. That certainly does it; reclusive, enigmatic, *degagé*, K.W. Jeter is a figure in shadow, bound on errands we know not of, quite likely winding the clockwork of some infernal machine that will blow this entire field into a new configuration just as soon as he can toss his device out from under his cloak.

Or maybe not. Maybe he's just a guy* possessed of the need to write fiction, as bemused as anyone by the compulsiveness with which each new SF writer is speedily assigned a (marketable) persona that may have little to do with the facts, let alone with common courtesy.

If just a guy . . . pretend, for a moment, that this is somehow possible here at the cutting edge of the Media Age . . . if just a guy, with the work separable from whatever he may look, taste and smell like personally, then what of the work when separated-out? What flavors?

Our task in this respect is made easier by the release of Signet's mass-market paperback, as distinguished from the 1985 Bluejay first edition, at $8.95 as a 248pp (trade) pb. [This latter information made available to me by my review copy of Brown and Contento's *Science Fiction in Print: 1985*.] This Signet first rack-size edition is surely the one most of you will buy. And you should; if you don't know this book, you don't know everything important in today's SF. What's more, you've missed out on some quite intelligent entertainment.*

The Glass Hammer is entertaining, and intelligent, despite the fact that it's written very much like this review, are you with me, K.W. Jeter? In fact, it's probably not quite as well-constructed a speculation as it seems, taking advantage of the effect created by multiple flashbacks, variations in prose mode, and narrow focus held on foreground events whilst sketching in a lot of noises offstage. If something seems missing in the skein as the reader unravels it, there is some tendency to assume it may very well have been there but has been overlooked in the reading. In the case of some aspects of *The Glass Hammer*, it simply isn't there at all, and in other cases requires so much re-reading

*I use the term in its American, not its British connotations, of course.

*The two things aren't really separable from each other by my lights. I think a book that's not entertaining enough to catch, involve and hold a median reader can not, per se, be of sufficient importance to alter the course of the water. All honor, of course, to those few whose sense of duty constrains them to draw charts by running up on the rocks and reefs of grim exposition. Those are probably excellent charts of where not to go yesterday.

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and puzzling-out that it's very likely too much effort. But what Jeter *has* put into this book is sufficiently impressive. We are dealing here with a talent whose excellences are large and whose shortcomings are expressive of choices made, perhaps unwisely but made, rather than being sigils of some inherent and unexamined mediocrity.*

The question is, what would it be like to be God's father? Schuyler the sprint-car driver, stooge for the Speed Death, Inc., media octopus, of course does not believe that his son is God. But he believes that the Godfriend warrior-maidens of his post-Holocaust culture do so believe, and the workers rioting in ecstasy among their dorms in South America do, and for some little while he even believes in the "numinous protection" afforded him by this relationship, as he repeatedly survives the nightly Phoenix-L.A. run on which the killer satellites are rapidly reducing his peers to zero.

Furthermore, little Lumen, even at the age of five, seems pretty convincing. Schyuler, and Lumen's mother, Cynth, tell each other it's all cultural; the boy is being raised in isolation by the Godfriends, who reinforce the belief-system with every breath he takes and shield him, and themselves, from all possible contradictions. Lumen is not really predicting the future or influencing present events, and if he seems remarkably self-contained for someone of his years, well, that, too, is an artifact. . . . But Schuyler kills him anyway, with Lumen's blessing and the cooperation of all concerned, though I missed Cynth's reaction.

This is not a story about sprint-car drivers "smuggling" on behalf of the world's only source of a particular Maguffin, nor is it a story about post-Holocaust social quirks, and it's not about Speed Death, Inc., for all that all sorts of media hardware and media types are deployed within this book, rather palely. It's a story about the stuff of organized religion, and a story about worship, which are two things not exactly the same.

It's also remarkably thin in the parts which are the same as those respective parts in Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The sprint-car driving/dodging/exploding sequences are nearly nonexistent. I think Jeter chose to do that — after all, not only did Zelazny execute them well enough, but others have repeated them quite often. Then, the culture of the entire West Coast is one founded on a Church which became, again, the repository of all surviving knowledge, but whose relevance now is questionable, and which has broken into sects so that the Godfriends

**We shall be getting to some comments on J. T. McIntosh's work and its significance to SF as a literature.*

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and the Cathedra Novum (sic) barely tolerate each other. There is nothing to distinguish this material from analogous sections of *Canticle*, preceding World War IIII, and as he did with Zelazny, Jeter leaves all the fine detail of this part to Miller. Speed Death, Inc., its media empire, its complex connection to the worker-dorm society, and its pervasion of the rest of the world's governing aspects, is generic to SF at least as far back as E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," and Jeter has left it to Gibson to show us how it will all work soon or is working already. In other words, I'm convinced Jeter is renting all this furniture, and pretty plainly so.

What is original Jeter — not even Philip K. Dick, really , despite reminders of *Valis* — is the ingenious theology, and the superb characterization and thematic format of Bischofsky, the earnest craftsman whose life is devoted to reconstructing a shattered stained-glass window.The supposition is, is it not, that no matter what time has done to scatter the fragments and expunge the records, modern technology can probably recover and fit them all back into their original picture . . . and that of course there is *a* picture, and that it was made all of this glass. But the more Bischofsky studies and the more he bends his mind to this task, the more ingenious the technological resources that permit reviewing and projecting all the possible combinations of these bits, the farther his growing agony takes him from the one true answer. It's in these segments — Jeter speaks of segments, rather than chapters — that we see why Jeter wrote this book, and are, I hope, glad of it. Certainly I was glad of it; the Bischofsky material is first-class insight and first-class illumination of insight.

I can see why some people want to claim Jeter for Cyberpunk, and I can even see their various reasons. But in here is the same essential preoccupation with godhead that underlies all of speculative fiction and has underlain science fiction since Mary Wollstonecraft invented or discovered this form of literature. *The Glass Hammer*, like many another nominally classifiable work in this field, cannot veraciously be assigned some unique contemporaneity. It is as much one with *Frankenstein* as it is with the latest effusion from a category-fiction PR department.

I think Jeter is saying so in the way he has pieced this book together.

On the other hand, maybe not.

Here's another one you should have if you care about enigmatic and lost segments of SF's past (and good reading): *Worlds of* If is a companion to the previous *Galaxy* anthology initiated by the indefatigable and ingenious Martin Harry Greenberg. (*Galaxy, thirty years of innovative science fiction,* same three editors, Playboy Press, $10.95, 1980) It differs from

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the *Galaxy* in not having an index — the one in the earlier book is anyhow its only poor feature — but is otherwise the same in concept; it reprints stories from over the span of the magazine's life, and in most cases provides relevant memoirs by their authors. Much of this is Good Stuff by heavyweight people. You want to remember that in 1967 *IF* won Hugos for Best Magazine, Best Novel, Best Novelette, Best Short Story, and Best Artist, according to the introduction by Fred Pohl, who was Editor then. The Harlan Ellison memoir on his "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," while perhaps unreadable under most conditions of the mind, is worth the price of the book on sheer weight alone, *nihil obstat*.

If you were wondering why someone should care, the fact is that perhaps, as this book asserts, something went out of SF, perhaps coincidentally, that has not returned since *If's* demise. Perhaps there were things about it that we don't yet understand, but should. It was a peculiar rider on the SF boom of the 1950s, eventually to be killed for being too successful in the 1960s, and for more on all of this I refer you to the anthology itself, whose nonfiction material — by among others Larry Shaw, Barry Malzberg and myself in addition to Pohl — reflects a widespread tendency to attempt to *explain* the magazine.

A special asset to this book is the essay by Shaw, the first SFnally knowledgeable editor *If* had. Shaw was the man who captured James Blish's "A Case of Conscience" for the magazine during the most recent previous major outbreak of frankly religion-based stories in SF. His essay on *If* and its founding publisher/editor, James Quinn, fills in a lot of hitherto opaque gaps. And it prompts some rumination.

When I dedicated *Rogue Moon* to "Larry Shaw, Journeyman Editor," it was with some trepidation. In common usage, a "journeyman" baseball player, for instance, will never be eulogized at Cooperstown. But in the trade unions, a journeyman is considered fit to leave home and stand up to the rain. I decided that as long as Larry and I understood the nature of the compliment intended, it would be O.K.

This field has its roots in commerce and pulp no matter where its head might be. It takes a peculiar blend of common sense and nurtured romanticism to operate effective publishing enterprises within it. The literature and any number of other features are constantly re-inventing themselves. You can navigate on instinct some of the time, and occasionally produce spectacular results, but the useful long-term quality is the one that causes you to go through all the moves, by the manual. The reason for this is that the product of your individual instinct is already obsolete by the time you attempt to use it

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again. Others have taken and run with it. Until you can detect the next new thing, or find ways to harness newness itself, you have to have the self-discipline to prevent yourself from going off in obsolete new directions. On the other hand, there is the constant need to contribute to the ongoing communal re-write of the manual, so that there is progress and a response to evolution. It's not easy to do this without losing your balance; I notice it's even difficult to explain.

Few features in the history of modern SF illustrate these truths so well as the narrative of James Quinn's conception and direction of *If* in the very early 1950s, the contemplation of what Shaw might have made of it in the mid-'50s if Quinn had given him even as much of a free hand as Irwin Stein later gave him at *Infinity*, and the record of what Frederik Pohl did make of it in the 1960s, when *If* was purchase from Quinn to be *Galaxy's* companion.

Well, at any rate, this book has been so long in the coming-out that Shaw, Philip K. Dick and Theodore Sturgeon have died in the meanwhile. (I feel fine, thank you.) That's because Playboy Press went through a gyration few understand but which left this book an orphan despite the success of the *Galaxy* volume. And now, of course, it was the book in process when Bluejay went through a gyration that involves a publishing consolidation of far-reaching but unpredictable consequences. This event includes Tor Books, just when it seemed Tor would be the new bellwether in SF; may very well yet be, nevertheless, but as a division of St. Martin's.

The more I look at it, the more it seems the *If* book was the perfect one for Bluejay to be doing at this time.

A brand-new publishing venture, and hopefully one destined to remain successful a long, long time, is represented by *Science Fiction in Print: 1985*, a major service of *Locus* Magazine's Charles N. Brown and William G. Contento, of the justly praised and long reliable Contento *Index to Science Fiction Anthologies and Collections* (whose format this new book uses). We are talking about people with a track record and the latest milestone of their production.

Accurately subtitled "A Comprehensive Bibliography of Books and Short Fiction Published in the English Language," Brown-Contento is the first production of Locus Press. It looks at hundreds of sources, lists books by title and by author, lists 1985 original publications, lists the contents of anthologies, devotes 25 8½ x 11 pages to a subject list, and then goes on to list the authors and titles of short stories. Appended are summaries on book and magazine publishing for the year, cinema production, a Recommended Reading list

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from *Locus* Magazine's review staff, and finally a list of small-press publisher addresses.

It's all in there; the entire year, and your library certainly ought to be told about its existence. 500 hardcover copies represent the entire run; buyers will be entitled to a free correction-sheet service if they furnish a 3x5 card with their name and address. A fairly relaxed scan did not indicate much need for it (but you never say never); One devoutly hopes this volume will find enough support to justify subsequent yearbooks.

That indefatigable and evidently growing enterprise, Chris Drumm, Books, has now reached another stage of value. Hitherto it was a source of author bibliographies, of otherwise unobtainable and often striking fiction by R.A. Lafferty and Richard Wilson, of (I blush) a uniquely valuable essay called "Nonliterary Influences on Science Fiction," in the only authorized edition, by Algis Budrys, and of catalogs of books for sale by Drumm. All of these were little pamphlets, about 4x7, some of them self-covered, and only in the future are you going to find examples typeset by computer; even this latest one is still reproduced from typewriting, in this case typewriting done on something a little below IBM in quality. But it's certainly readable, and it's tellingly valuable inasmuch as it's the memoir of a writer who flourished in the 1960s and was one of Damon Knight's outstanding critical targets because he was *almost* good.

Judging by the memoir, James Macgregor is an honest workman, God bless him, who has done the best he could whenever circumstances permitted. But he stands before us here today because he is a prototype, and I apologize to him for making a lay figure of him for our purposes here.

'Round about 1950 there was an SF boom, in which this magazine, *Galaxy, If,* and scores of other titles were launched to various effects. Shortly thereafter, the book market for SF began to perk up, and this represented the first media reconfiguration the field had seen since 1926. It's fair to say that what happened in the fifteen years after 1950 is still very much with us. Sometimes in the sense that Philip K. Dick began then, did not end then, and is responsible for at least some of what the K.W. Jeters are doing. Sometimes in the sense that some of us who first appeared then are still around, have arrived in 1987 by various paths, and speak in ways we would not have thought of had we come some other way.

But in among the hopeful new launches of bright young post-adolescents hippety-hopping around in this Spring pond and looking forward to dropping their tails someday were "J.T. M'Intosh" and his imitators; not so much SF fans as careerists, not

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burdened by untoward aspiration, offered the opportunity, thanks to proliferation, to make a living at SF did they but turn out enough of it speedily enough. Macgregor's debut did not precede this time. He was not significantly older than Dick, or Robert Sheckley, who were looked upon in 1951 as people just setting out; trying their talents, searching for the ultimate direction of their powers. But M'Intosh arrived clearly as he would always be; competent, industrious, and capable of filling pages. Never once did he betray any desire to evolve his skills beyond the point of basic acceptability, and in Knight's eyes, at least, rarely did he think a story situation past the point of first-impression plausibility. Under Knight's scalpel, his work came apart . . . usefully, for some of us young ones who could feel something not quite right in M'Intosh's constructs, but couldn't quite parse it out.

The point I am making here is that there were a number of M'Intoshes during that time; though it seems a terribly rude thing to say, I feel that the history of SF would be essentially the same if they had never published a word, yet they fulfilled many a reader's expectation and were often acceptable to people whose perceptions are respected. M'Intosh was, for intance, a rather frequent byline in *F&SF* under the editorship of Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas.

The memoir is straightforward exposition, businesslike but not stiff, and tells us, I think, a very great deal about the difference between one kind of young writer and another. I recommend it highly.

Books to Look For

by Orson Scott Card

REPLAY, Ken Grimwood, (Arbor House, cloth, $17.95)

Jeff Winston has a heart attack and dies, leaving behind a failing marriage and a tired career. So why does he find himself back in 1963, in college,

---

This new column of short reviews will be a regular F&SF department, which will appear in addition to the Books essay by Algis Budrys. The new column is in the hands of Orson Scott Card, known to F&SF readers for his short fiction. Mr. Card is also a novelist (whose Ender's Game *won the 1986 Hugo and Nebula awards for best novel) and a critic, whose reviews have appeared in* Science Fiction Review *and other publications.*

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in his own youthful body, with all his memories of the next twenty years intact?

What would *you* do? Jeff makes a quick fortune gambling on sure things; this time the 1970s and 1980s are filled with the glamor and disappointment of wealth. Until he dies again. And again wakes up in 1963.

And again, and again, replays of his past life, each time wiser than the time before, each time surprised by new joy, new pain: Children he raised and then lost, lovers who don't want him the second time around. Desperately lonely with all his knowledge that he cannot share, he searches for others caught in the same endless loop of lifetimes. And finds some.

Grimwood's style is clear, penetrating. He leads us through Jeff Winston's lives with great skill, never lingering too long with any one experience, never moving so rapidly that we cannot taste the flavor of each passage through the decades.

Replay is a *Pilgrim's Progress* for our time, a stern yet affectionate portrait of the lives we lead. When I finished it, I felt I had been moving with the hidden rhythm of life, that I had seen more clearly, that I had loved more deeply than is ever possible in one short passage of years.

Don't look here for heroes with blasters or magic swords. *Replay* isn't bigger than life. Instead it shows how large our small lives really are.

• • •

ARSLAN, M.J. Engh, (Arbor House, cloth, $16.95)

You want to know how an editor shows courage? It isn't by saving babies from burning buildings. Editorial courage is when you tell the publisher that you want to reprint, as a hardcover, a science fiction novel by somebody that nobody ever heard of, a novel that came out as a paperback original nearly a decade ago — and *flopped*.

That's the kind of proposal that can get an editor permanently labeled as crazy.

But that's exactly what David Hartwell did at Arbor House, with Mary Jane Engh's *Arslan*. And David Hartwell isn't crazy. Because this book, which has been languishing in the grey reaches of the Land of Out-of-Print for all these years, is without question one of the finest works of fiction of our generation.

Arslan has conquered the world; nobody quite knows how. He comes into a small Illinois town, takes all the children hostage, and commits selected acts of public rape and murder to break the will of the people. Arslan forces the grade school principal, Franklin Bond, to run the community in his name, as he deliberately dismantles all trade, all industry, all of modern life. Yet this is only the beginning of his terrible plan for mankind.

What makes this book so brilliant, so terrible in its truth, is that Arslan is

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not the villain but the hero. Engh knows our terrible secret: humanity's clandestine love affair with absolute power, how we worship even as we rebel. Some readers will hate this book for precisely that reason; Engh exposes a side of human nature that we would like to deny.

But we can't deny it. Hitler was real; so was Stalin. Yet in the four decades since these towering figures left the world stage, we still have not begun to explain them or understand why, as hideous as they were, great nations loved and followed them. Except in the pages of *Arslan*.

That's how important I believe *Arslan* is. Yet because it was a "category" book with a military cover, because it had no hype when it first appeared, almost nobody knew about it. Hartwell knew. Algis Budrys knew, when he praised this book a few years ago in these very pages. Now I've told you again and the book is there for you to buy. So buy it. Read it.

I don't promise that you'll enjoy it. It isn't always fun to have your eyes opened.

But maybe that's how a reader shows courage.

AGENT OF BYZANTIUM, Harry Turtledove, (Contemporary Books, cloth, $15.95)

Harry Turtledove is a historian, and the Byzantine Empire is his specialty. Harry Turtledove is also a very talented science fiction writer, with a gift for finding a way to present a fascinating idea through strong, believable characters.

So when Turtledove writes about an alternate history in which Mohammed never founded Islam and Byzantium never fell, he never falters. His protagonist, Basil Argyros, is the consummate bureaucrat in the imperial bureaucracy whose twists and turns made "byzantine" the English word for awesome complexity. Argyros becomes the agent who deals with several dire threats to the empire; we, as modern readers, realize that what he is really doing is bringing the Renaissance and an industrial and scientific revolution to Byzantium.

Turtledove could have been content with his clever ideas, which are good enough for most writers of idea-oriented science fiction — but he is not. Over the course of the book, Argyros becomes a powerful figure as he faces change and loss with courage and resourcefulness. After a while you realize that this book is not "about" the discovery of the telescope, vaccination, or the printing press; it is about human response to change.

We who read sf magazines should take a special delight in this book; we've been watching Turtledove since he debuted a couple of years ago with remarkable maturity in his storytelling. Book readers are only now discovering what *we've* seen all along.

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(This feeling of smug superiority is only one of the rewards of reading sf magazines, but it's one of my favorites.)

THE TRUE GAME SERIES, Sheri S. Tepper, (Peter's books: ***King's Blood Four, Necromancer Nine, Wizard's Eleven***; Mavin's books: ***The Song of Mavin Manyshaped, The Flight of Mavin Manyshaped, The Search of Mavin Manyshaped*** [Ace, $2.75-$2.95 ea.]; Jinian's books: ***Jinian Footseer, Dervish Daughter, Jinian Star-Eye*** [Tor, $2.95 ea.])

This looks for all the world like the standard fantasy series, complete with a gaming motif. "Ah," says the jaded reader, "another Dungeons and Dragons rehash."

Wrong, says this equally jaded reviewer. Tepper is something special, and so is this series. It starts out feeling like fantasy, sure enough, with an aristocracy of Gamesmen who use startling powers in their wars and feuds.

But soon enough we realize that this is not fantasy at all. It is science fiction, set on a world settled by human beings many centuries before; and beneath the True Game is a contest even deeper, between the native inhabitants of the planet and the human interlopers. It leads to a powerful, illuminating conclusion that lifts this story out of the ranks of grunting blood-and-thunder adventure and into the heady realm of thoughtful, entertaining science fiction.

Tepper isn't perfect. There are flaws ranging from the trivial — her characters throw up a bit too often — to the substantial — the structure of the series is awkward, with the second trilogy (Mavin's books) being a flashback from the first (Peter's books). But the story is well worth the occasional inconvenience, and it marks Tepper as a writer to watch.

THE BEST F & SF NOVELS OF 1986

In alphabetical order (by title), the novels that stood out as the best of the best I read.

Robert Charles Wilson, *A Hidden Place* (Bantam). Two frail aliens are trapped in Depression-era small-town America, where they must depend on alienated humans to save them. Wilson's exquisitely written first novel takes an unblinking look at how we try to own the people we love.

Leigh Kennedy, *The Journal of Nicholas the American* (Atlantic Monthly Press). Kennedy's first novel is the compelling story of a young man who has inherited his family's sensitivity to other people's pain, and is nearly destroyed by the desperate need of a dying woman.

Mike Resnick, *Santiago* (Tor). If you want, you can read this as a wonderful rip-roaring space opera/western/detective/mystery/spy novel. But it's also a carefully layered examination of the tension between individuality and responsibility, between

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legend and reality.

Pamela Sargent, *The Shore of Women* (Crown). Birana is exiled from the peaceful, high-tech city of women for her mother's crime; Arvil is the man assigned by the "gods" to murder her. Their saga may be one of the great novels of science fiction.

Terry Bisson, *Talking Man* (Arbor House). It's hard to believe that the same book can take you through the Mississippi Canyon, the burning of Denver, and an auto race across the dry Arctic basin; but Bisson brings off his story of a Kentucky junkyard wizard with panache.

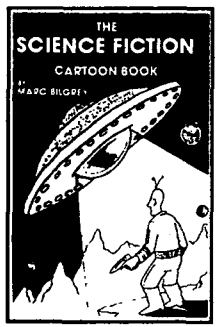
The Honor Roll: Stephen R. Boyett, *Architect of Sleep* (Ace): a fragmentary visit to an America ruled by raccoons. Michael P. Kube-McDowell, *Enigma* (Berkley): cosmic sci-fi at its best. Isaac Asimov, *Foundation and Earth* (Doubleday): all talk, no action — but Asimov's talk *is* action. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Houghton Mifflin): a dark if-this-goes-on story of Fundamentalist America. James Morrow, *This Is the Way the World Ends* (Henry Holt): a bittersweet comedy that assigns the blame for World War III. Megan Lindholm, *Wizard of the Pigeons* (Ace): magic among Seattle street people.

"GREAT FUN!"
— RAY BRADBURY

"THIS IS WHAT I CALL A REAL LAUGHING MATTER."
— ROBERT BLOCH

"AN EXCELLENT PIECE OF HUMOROUS INVENTION . . . AN AID TO LAUGHTER IN A TIME WHEN WE NEED IT . . ." — ANDRE NORTON

"AN AMUSING SET OF TAKE OFFS."
— POUL ANDERSON



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Neil W. Hiller ("First I Came to Los Angeles," August 1986) here deals with a common complaint among writers about the editor (or editors) who cruelly cuts a manuscript to the bone.

The Orphan

BY

NEIL W. HILLER

Wendel Newhouse. The name popped into postman John McNally's mind the moment he heard the first heavy footfalls of Newhouse's ponderous galumphing on the wooden stairs above.

Apartment 4G, McNally thought to himself, deftly slotting the day's last envelope for *387 East 7th Street* into its box from between his first two fingers. Amateurs used thumbs. McNally was a veteran of many years in "his" East Village neighborhood.

He smiled as he swung the master door rattling back into place, where it closed with a soft click. He scooped his keys from the end of the square-linked brass chain attached to a belt loop, and locked up. *Not much for The Big Guy today.*

Despite years of practice at associating the faces and persons of the shopkeepers and apartment dwellers on his route with the names on the outside of the mail he delivered to them, McNally knew he couldn't *always* attach a name to someone greeting him on the street, or to a person whose footsteps he heard approaching from down a hallway. So he allowed himself a reasonable margin of error in the memory game he had invented long ago to keep the dullish days, otherwise indistinct, from fusing together.

But people like the tenant of apartment 4G, now noisily descending the stairs, made McNally's memory game very easy at times. He reviewed his mental image of Newhouse: an enormous man six feet four inches tall at least, and not a lot under three hundred pounds in weight, McNally guessed. Still, at that, Newhouse's head appeared somehow outsized, surmounted as it was with his sur-

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pluses of wavy brown hair combed back over his ears and seemingly supported from beneath by the man's luxuriant, dark brown, carefully trimmed full beard.

In fact, Newhouse looked exactly like McNally's central casting image of a Mountain Man as McNally observed him around the neighborhood, frequently, it seemed, carrying double armloads of bulging grocery sacks, or with a twelve-pack of beer slung effortlessly under each arm.

Newhouse's usual costume, a plaid flannel lumberjack shirt under yards of Oshkosh B'Gosh bib overalls over high-topped work boots, had helped form McNally's showfolk image of the oversized addressee. But Newhouse was not an actor at all, though there were several of them living on McNally's route. He was, however, someone just as interesting as an actor to McNally and memorable for the purposes of McNally's game — for Newhouse was a writer.

McNally had delivered loads of letters and bulky brown envelopes with names in the return addresses that he had recognized from the spines of books like Fairer, Strout on Union Square, or Doubleton up on Park Avenue.

In fact, McNally reckoned, Newhouse had had manuscripts returned by just about every publisher he knew the name of — and not a few by those he didn't.

The man himself now clumped down the last few stairs to the landing and heaved into McNally's view through the doorway into the lobby.

"Morning, John," Newhouse huffed from the effort of his descent, his booming basso voice nevertheless reverberating off the dull white tile in the small foyer. He planted an outsized left palm on the murky green paint well above where the tile ended, and leaned against it. His right hand was wrapped around the carton of one of his twelve-packs, resting on his denimed hip. "Anything from the prĕsident for me today, John?"

"Nah, nothing important for you, Tom," McNally answered. "Just your Con Ed bill and the United Way solicitation everybody's getting today," he smiled, wondering how much there was for a charity to collect out of such a building as Newhouse lived in. "Say," he continued, "little early for a six-pack, ain'a? Let alone two like you got there," he said, pointing at the carton under the big man's arm.

Newhouse threw back his head and roared with mirth at the thought. "Right, John. Except this isn't beer in here." He removed his hand from the wall and patted the box with it. "This is my new novel, my baby, ***World Enough and Time.***"

"You mean you've got a *book* in there?" McNally asked, his practiced eye measuring. "Must be at least a thousand pages."

"Eleven hundred in manuscript," Newhouse responded proudly. "It'll

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probably go at about seven hundred or so when it's typeset."

The two alternated out the door of the apartment house into the warm spring sunlight and descended the stairs together to where McNally's mail cart awaited him on the sidewalk.

"I hope that I'm not going to have to schlepp that thing back to you up four flights of stairs," McNally said plaintively, and then smiled.

Newhouse didn't. "Not this one, John," he said fervently. "Not this time. I put an awful lot into this one. This one is not coming back.

"This one was not done on speculation," Newhouse continued, patting the box again as if for reassurance. "It was sold up front to my editor, Jeanine Fanning. She's a very big name in my field. Jeanine paid me a three-thousand-dollar advance for *World Enough* on the basis of my outline and the first ten chapters. When she accepts this" — he hefted the beer carton, then cradled it — "I'll get the other half of the advance. And in just a few months, after this baby has gotten off the bookstore shelves and into the hands of the readers, where it really counts, why . . ." A white smile dawned brightly in the forest surrounding it. ". . . you'll just get lots of chances to deliver those nice, slim, light royalty checks — and I'll get to quit working as a bouncer in that disco down on Houston Street."

With that, Newhouse lumbered off down the block without salute, leaving McNally looking after him, hoping The Big Guy was not setting himself up for a big disappointment.

Melanie Driscoll fidgeted on the banquette seat in the fashionable L'Homme Fin restaurant. It was 12:45 and the darkly pretty Ms. Driscoll was not accustomed to men being late for engagements — particularly not writers. She stirred her second Bloody Mary and absently flicked the little straw from the glass next to its predecessor on the beige linen tablecloth.

Where the hell was Newhouse?

Unconsciously, Melanie slid the large manilla envelope on the bench seat next to her a little closer. She raised the squat red tumbler from the table to her lips and sipped, avoiding eye contact with the tuxedoed headwaiter hovering nearby, hoping, she knew, that the companionless lady would order soon so he could get a second sitting at her table.

She studied the huge centerpiece of bright summer flowers on the central buffet with languid disinterest, as if composed.

Even though the conversation that she had to have with Newhouse promised to be a little dicey, Melanie had been looking forward to seeing the gigantic writer. At least everyone in the office said he was a giant. For, although she was his editor now, Melanie had never met him. Anyway, it was inconceivable, Melanie felt on

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further consideration, that the guy would just not show up. Not a writer. Not for a meeting with an editor.

She surveyed the area around the maître d's station at the front of the restaurant, concentrating on not appearing to be doing so.

A tall, good-looking, tropical-tan-suited man with neatly combed brown hair and a small, trim mustache was chatting with the maître d', who was motioning toward her table.

It can't be Newhouse, she thought. This guy — for he was approaching her now, weaving easily among the intervening tables — was a ***hunk*** — not two, the way Newhouse had been described to her.

"Ms. Driscoll?" he asked in a measured tenor. She frowned; this was impossible. "I'm Tom Newhouse."

The headwaiter scurried over and pulled out the chair for him. He sat down lightly and smiled up at the man. "Club soda with lime, please," he said. Then, facing her, misinterpreting her frown: "I'm sorry I'm so late." He placed his palms on his thighs and appraised her. "I decided to walk up from the Village," he said, "and I guess I just didn't allow enough time. Exercise, you know," he said, now patting his flat stomach with his hands. "Good for me. Keeps the blood pumping to the old brain on these muggy August days."

"I don't get much myself," Melanie said, studying him. "Exercise, I mean. I should, I know. But somehow, with all the work in the office during the day, and reading manuscripts in my apartment at night and on weekends, somehow I never seem to get the chance."

A waiter set a glass of ice before Newhouse and upended a miniature green bowling-pin-shaped bottle into it.

"Thanks," Newhouse said. He smiled at Melanie. "Did you have to wreck a weekend or two reading mine at home?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and plunged right after him into the purpose of their meeting. "No, I worked on yours"— she moved her hand to the large envelope beside her — "in the office. A lot."

She sipped from her Bloody Mary, he from his soda. "Actually," she continued, returning the thick red concoction to the table, "Jeanine had already done a fair amount of the editing on ***World Enough and Time*** before she left to start work over at Croward, MacGann."

He watched her, waiting.

"Actually," she said, "it was way too long."

"Was?"

"Yes, between Jeanine's stuff and mine, your manuscript got so full of cross-outs and stets, of little blue and yellow stickers and marginalia and insert sheets, that I took the liberty of having it retyped for you in edited form." She handed him the envelope from the seat beside her.

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He took it from her as if it contained explosives, gingerly hefting it in his hand. He placed it gently in his lap.

"Can't be more than a couple hundred pages left of it," he accused her incredulously. "That why we're in a chic French restaurant in Midtown instead a place like the Beer and Burger in the Village, where Jeanine agreed to publish my book in the first place?" he said heatedly, his voice rising above the muted conversation and click of silver on porcelain around them.

"Look, Tom," Melanie told him. "I know it's not easy to have your book become an orphan. . . ."

"An orphan?"

"Yes. When your editor quits a publishing house or gets fired or just, you know, 'leaves the building,' your manuscript becomes an orphan. Nobody left in the place knows quite what to do with it, or what the original editor saw in it or had in mind for it. A lot of people don't even want to be associated with it at all."

He nodded. "I see."

"But please try to understand that it's not easy to *adopt* someone else's orphan, either, no matter how hard you try."

"Did any of you ever stop to think about what you had to do to a parent to *make* an orphan?"

"I know how much you put into your book, Tom. That's why I've done the best job I could with it. Under the circumstances."

The headwaiter flicked open two enormous menus and inserted them into the conversation. "You could have talked to me," Newhouse said to her over the top of his.

Melanie turned the pages of hers intently. "Gee, this is so huge," she said. "Everything looks so good here, you don't know what to have. I wonder why they don't try to make the selection a little more manageable . . . ," she asked without emerging.

"Maybe . . . ," Newhouse said, handing his menu to the hovering captain, ". . . they left out what didn't need to be in it *before* they gave it to you." She peered out from behind her copy.

"Spinach salad, lemon juice, no bacon," Newhouse told the captain.

John McNally pushed his mail cart down the street in front of him, the pitted wheels crunching through the remaining fallen leaves scattered on the uneven gray pavement.

It was a chilly day early in November, but the crisp air at least smelled vaguely countrified — at least to McNally's citified nose.

McNally watched as a tall, skinny man in shorts and T-shirt with very close-cropped hair trotted up to him, stopped, and continued jogging in place, perspiration glistening on his clean-shaven face below a soggy headband. "Anything for me today, John?" The jogger smiled at him.

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"Sorry, mister," McNally said ruefully. "I hate to admit it, but, much as I try, I'm afraid I don't remember your address. Must be losing my touch . . . ."

"I'm Tom Newhouse, John." He stopped jogging and shook his head. "I guess I lost a little weight, you know, running and all." He studied McNally. "I look that different, huh?"

"Tom, you've lost a lot more than a little weight," McNally said, real concern in his voice for the man he still thought of as The Big Guy.

"Yeah, I also lost that bouncer job at the disco down on Houston. . . ."

"And it ain't from no jogging. You sure you been taking good care of yourself?" McNally asked. "You know, there's been a lot of nasty stuff going around this fall. . . ."

"I'm just fine, John. Anything from the president today?"

"Yeah. There's something for you, all right," McNally said, rummaging through the large pieces and magazines in his cart. "Something from your publisher." He selected an inch-thick manila envelope and handed it to Newhouse. "How's your project with them coming?" McNally concentrated, then remembered. "*World Enough and Time*. Where's that stand now?" he asked.

"Well, let's just see," Newhouse replied, tearing open the envelope McNally had handed him. He read hurriedly, his face clouding over, the letter held to his face with his left hand, his right holding a thumb-width sheaf of papers.

"A novella!" A soprano wail escaped him as he stamped his foot in frustration. "They've turned my brainchild into a bloody novella," he keened incredulously. "And they've changed editors on me again. The new one, Martin Burnside, says he 'is anxious to include it in the next Spring Anthology.'"

For a long moment, Newhouse stood, his hands full of papers thrust downward at his sides, head thrown back, his eyes squeezed tightly shut against the weak November light illuminating his face.

"You all right, Tom?" McNally asked, concern now frankly in his voice. Newhouse lowered his head, opened his eyes, and looked at the postman, who told him, "I'm awful sorry to hear that news, Tom. I really am. I know how much you put into that book of yours."

"I don't understand. I just don't understand. I don't think I'm going to be able to take it if they diddle anymore with *World Enough and Time.*"

Newhouse walked off down the street, muttering to himself, his spindly legs wobbling above fragile ankles rising from low-cut running shoes.

In the metallic gray light of an overcast March day, red and amber lights winked alternately atop the dirty white and orange St. Vincent's vehi-

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cle double-parked outside 387 East 7th Street.

AMBULANCE, John McNally read from the front of the vehicle as he approached it with his cart. *Wonder who's sick,* he thought as he watched a black sedan pull out from behind the ambulance and drive off.

As McNally started up the flight of stairs to the front door, it banged open and a man carrying one end of a stretcher backed out toward McNally. The postman retraced his steps and waited at the bottom. A second attendant, a grim-faced woman, emerged from the door bearing the other end of the stretcher.

There was no way for McNally to tell which attendant carried the head of the stretcher and which the foot, because the white sheet covering the narrow windrow in the middle of the stretcher was uniformly strapped down from top to bottom: there was no opening for a head and shoulders.

McNally got an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. *Somebody must be dead,* he thought to himself.

"What happened? Who is it?" McNally asked the attendant as the man turned to walk frontward, easily shifting the weight of the stretcher from underhand to overhand as he turned. McNally walked along beside the stretcher, clutching 387's mail.

"Jesus, this guy's light," the attendant remarked, then answered McNally: "Guy named Newhouse. Apartment 4G. He one of your customers?" the attendant cocked an eye and asked McNally.

"No!" McNally cried.

"No? How come? He lived right here on your route."

"I mean, no, I can't believe Newhouse is dead. And he *was* one of my 'customers,' as you say," the stricken McNally said tonelessly, shuffling sideways beside the stretcher, looking down. "Now he's one of yours," he added in sick wonder.

"He ain't one of *ours,*" the attendant protested. "Morgue wagon's busy today. M.E. just asked us to drop this one off for him as a favor since we'd already been called here by mistake . . . ."

"Used to be a big, strapping, healthy guy, too. I wonder what happened to him."

"I don't know, buddy. And if he was a big guy, you can't prove it by the way he looked when we found him, crashed there on the worn-out linoleum in the kitchen, phone lying beside him off the hook." They stopped at the rear of the ambulance, and the attendants slid the stretcher in through the open door.

Wordlessly, the woman attendant walked around to the driver's side of the ambulance, climbed behind the wheel, and slammed the door. The man turned to McNally. "She's upset." He closed the door on Newhouse. "We don't get too many stiffs. . . ." McNally flinched. The attendant regarded him. "Anyway, I ain't never

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seen a guy so wasted away to nothing but skin and bones. He must'a had malnutrition or something. There was nothing left of his head except the skull. . . ."

McNally walked away. The ambulance drove off a few moments later.

The postman trudged across the sidewalk and up the stair to distractedly deliver the mail he had been carrying.

When he had finished slotting the day's quota into its proper boxes, he wearily rattled the master door closed and locked it with the key he scooped up with the bunch from the end of his square-linked brass chain. In his left hand he held a monarch-sized envelope addressed to T. Wendel Newhouse.

It was from the late writer's publisher.

McNally didn't often break a little rule, let alone a major one, but today was an exceptional day. He stepped through the door to the foot of the stairs, tore open the envelope, and read.

• • •

Dear Tom,

I was really worried after our phone call today. You just didn't sound right somehow. So I thought I'd better write you a note to explain.

I'm sure you know that different editors have different tastes and different ways of approaching projects. After they'd asked me to take over the Spring Anthology from Martin, I just didn't see how your wonderful *short story, "World Enough and Time," was going to fit in with the rest of the pieces I'd decided to include.*

I'm sorry you were disappointed, Tom, and I think you're going to have good success with your writing. I think so because there are a lot *of editors in the business now who know how much you put into your work.*

Sincerely,
Mary F. Twillmeyer
Senior Editor

McNally shook his head sadly, threw Newhouse's final letter into the trash, and walked out of the door to finish his round for the day.

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Although Richard Paul Russo is new to F & SF, *he is not new to science fiction. He is a 1983 graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop and has published in* Asimov's *and in the anthology THE FIELDS OF FIRE. This past year he sold his first novel to TOR Books. "Prayers Of A Rain God" is a tight, taut story of the problems a diety faces.*

Prayers of a Rain God

BY
RICHARD PAUL RUSSO

Janet watched him tremble in the moonlight slanting through the window. Garrett was dreaming again, the same "vision" that now repeated three or four times a week. She could tell from his constricted face, the sweat on his neck, and the abrupt, irregular gasps, as if he were short of breath. . . .

They pray to him for rain.

Disembodied, he hovers above them, above the vast expanse of barren rock and sand, dirt mounds, a dying forest in the distance. The sun is fierce, leeching all moisture from the air. A few thin plants still grow, spindly and brittle. A dry riverbed weaves through rock and sand, then flows into what was once an enormous lake. Several tiny pools of water remain scattered about the riverbed and the lake, and the abandoned hulls of several small sailing vessels lie on the sloping beach.

Here, at the mouth of the dry river, they have gathered, fifty or sixty in number, and they pray to him.

They are not human, but clearly intelligent. Bipedal, lightly furred in varying shades of rust, orange, tan — one, the tallest, is dark black — they stand at the edge of the barren lake and raise their faces to him.

Their eyes are small, recessed, their noses long, stiff and narrow. If there are ears, they are hidden among the tufts of fine fur covering their heads. Their narrow mouths open and close as they speak to him. Some raise their long, gangly arms to the sun and sky, fingers outstretched. In their gestures, and in their faces, he recognizes their supplication to him, their god.

They are dying, his people. They whisper and sing at the river mouth,

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praying to him for rain, and for life.

Garrett woke in a panic, his throat dry and constricted. He gasped for breath in the darkness, reached out frantically, and tossed the sheet and blanket from him. Janet gripped his hand and held it to her breast.

"Garrett," she whispered. "It's O.K., I'm here." Her voice soothed and eased away the fear.

He turned, and in the light of the moon could see her face, the smooth skin, her large eyes gazing at him. She released his hand and wiped at the sweat on his forehead.

"Water?" she said.

Garrett nodded. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. A slight tremor went through his hand, then faded. He filled the tumbler with water from the glass pitcher he'd begun to keep on the night-stand. Moonlight reflected through the clear water, and Garrett quickly drained the glass. He refilled it, drank down the chilled water, and replaced the glass on the nightstand. He was still thirsty, but felt bloated and queasy.

Garrett looked out through the lace curtains at the nearly full moon. He could not shake the feelings of dread and responsibility. And guilt.

"The dream?" Janet asked.

"No dream," he answered. The exchange was becoming tense ritual. Janet persisted in calling them dreams, and he refused to give them that name. Garrett pulled open the window and let in the cold night air; he still felt the heat of the parched world drawing moisture from him.

Maybe it was time to go back into space. Just a short trip, back to the moon, or even a shuttle up to one of the stations. Something to give him some perspective. He shook his head. Perspective on what? People, intelligent beings, were dying on some other world, and a trip to the moon wasn't going to help them. Nothing would. Except rain.

It was early evening, but Garrett was already in bed. Janet sat in the kitchen, drinking tea. She considered fixing a drink, a Jack on the rocks, but she really didn't want one. She turned on the small table radio, tuned in to a classical station. Something she didn't recognize, as usual, was playing. The quiet music was just loud enough so she would not hear Garrett snore, or toss in the bed.

Janet wondered if he would have the dream again, his vision. She didn't know what to think about it anymore. His dreams had driven them apart from each other, though they both fought to remain close. She felt she was fighting a losing battle.

There had always been a distant quality to Garrett, even before they were married. Janet had often felt his mind was only partially attuned to the world around him, that part of his thoughts were somewhere else — in

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another room, another city, on some other world. It seemed quite appropriate that he had chosen the space program for a career, that he had striven to become an astronaut. And she had not been surprised at his success.

So Garrett had begun to go into space, making several trips a year to the two stations and the moon, training hard and long as plans were made to venture to Mars and beyond. Janet had little trouble adjusting to his long absences; they seemed a natural part of Garrett's makeup. And she was busy herself, teaching German at State. There was no real distance between them, and his trips into space had put up no new barriers.

Then came the second Mars mission, which had gone smoothly, a huge success. Garrett was a part of it, had been gone nearly two years, and came back home to her relatively unchanged — until the dreams began. Now she felt him drifting completely away from her, despite their efforts. He had become obsessed with his visions.

Janet looked at the wall clock. It was nearly eleven. She turned off the radio, put her mug in the sink, and went into the bedroom.

Garrett was sleeping peacefully on his side, one arm on top of the blankets, his head between the two pillows. If he was dreaming, it was a normal dream.

She undressed, put on her knee-length nightshirt, and crawled into bed next to him. She turned onto her side, her back to him, and eased against his body. In his sleep he moved closer so their bodies fit snugly together, and put one arm over her that she held to her breast, both hands clasped around his fingers. As she drifted into sleep, she let the silent tears drip freely onto the pillow.

The drought continues. The sun and the heat remain.

The people below him, these intelligent, furred beings, move slowly about their village near the dry riverbed. He can now distinguish males from females, though the differences were not immediately obvious.

Their dwellings are made of wood and stone, small rectangular structures built against rock mounds or small hillocks. Several large cooking pits are spaced regularly among the buildings. Most of the cooking pits seem to be abandoned.

The distant forest is now a skeletal maze of thin dried trunks and branches without leaves. Occasionally a small, light-skinned animal scurries over the ground, hurrying from shelter to shelter. Scattered about in all directions are the skeletons of larger animals, the bones clean and bleached; no carcasses remain, no shred of meat or skin on any of them.

A few of his people wander in the riverbed, searching for food or small

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pools of water. One male, the single black-furred being, searches farther upstream, and periodically pokes a long digit into the dry bed, feeling for moisture.

Toward noon most activity ceases. All members of the village gather lethargically at the riverbed, then amble slowly toward the lake. As they walk, many of them ruffle the fur around their necks and under their arms, an apparent attempt to keep cool.

At the lake's edge they form patterns, all facing the dry lake bed. The younger ones form a double row in front, each an arm's length from those on either side. The adults then form two half circles behind them, the black-furred one in the center of the back row.

A chant begins from the children and is taken up by the adults. The dark one reaches up to the sky, reaches up to his god and howls, his voice cracked and anguished. Several others raise their arms, and the prayer increases in intensity.

I want to bring you rain, Garrett thinks. *I am trying.*

But he knows they do not hear his thoughts, and he feels helpless. What good is a god who can do nothing for his people? Of what use is a god who lets his people die?

He and Janet walked through the eastern end of Golden Gate Park on a Monday afternoon. Overhead, dark clouds rolled past, threatening rain. Garrett and Janet were dressed warmly, in coats, scarves, and boots. In the nearly deserted Children's Playground, they sat on a bench facing the main play area. Two boys, about seven or eight years old and bundled up in parkas and mittens, moved unsteadily across a bridge of chains and tires while a woman stood nearby, watching and smoking a cigarette.

"You need to do something," Janet said. "It's getting worse, not better. You don't sleep enough at night anymore, you're always tired. All right, for now it's O.K., but when your leave is over, and you have to go back. . . ." She stopped and shrugged. "It's not doing a hell of a lot for our relationship, either."

Garrett closed his eyes and leaned his head back. He tried to will the clouds overhead to open, release a downpour, or at least a drizzle. No water fell.

"I know they seem like dreams to you," he said. He felt for her and put his hand on her knee. "I'd probably think that's all they were, except. . . ." He opened his eyes, sat up, and looked at her. "There's too damn much logic to them. And a regular pattern. If they were simply repetitive, but they aren't. The drought goes on, everything is drying out, getting worse. Each 'dream' is a slight progression from the previous, and they never go back. I can't believe dreams could do this over such a long period of time."

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Janet pushed both hands into her coat pockets. "What else could they be? Visions? A door into another reality? Telepathic contact with another world? Jesus, Garrett, we've been through all this before, and none of it makes any sense. Every idea sounds absurd."

He stood and began to pace back and forth in front of the bench. Several times he started to speak, but couldn't. Finally he breathed in deeply and stopped pacing.

"Look, something I haven't told you. The first time it happened, the first time I had this . . . 'vision,' whatever you want to call it, I was not asleep. I was awake, and I wasn't dreaming." He paused, but she remained silent, waiting. "I was not even here on Earth." He started to pace again.

"It was just after we'd burned out of orbit from Mars. I was awake, we were all awake. Suddenly I was . . . there. On this strange world, *above* the world, looking down on drying streams that had obviously once been rivers, on a pond that had once been a large lake, on a dying forest. Looking down on a dying race of intelligent beings. It went on a long time —hours, it seemed, as I watched these alien creatures moving through their world, trying to survive. And when it ended, and I was 'back' in the ship, no one had noticed a thing. Practically no time had passed. I hadn't gone into any kind of trance, and I sure hadn't been asleep to dream."

He stood watching the two boys, who had stopped playing on the bridge and were wrestling in the sand. It began to rain lightly, and the woman called to the boys. They ran over to her, and the three of them hurried away.

"You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

Garrett shook his head. He found it difficult to turn around and look directly at her, but he managed it. A few strands of hair were wet and pressed against her face. Her face was so clean and smooth, and her eyes were so large and open. Water dripped from her hair.

"The craziest thing," he began. "The hardest thing, the most absurd part of all this is that they were praying. They were praying to me, their god." He looked down at his open hands, then back at her. "I am their god."

Garrett stood in the rain watching Janet, waiting for her to respond. After several minutes she stood, put her arm through his, and pressed tightly.

"Let's go home," she said.

They had not spoken for hours. After coming in from the rain, and showering separately, Janet had fixed up a fire while Garrett worked on dinner. She sat in front of the fire with a Heinrich Böll novel and sipped at a Jack Daniels. The flames drew her gaze, and she spent more time staring at them than reading.

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She didn't know what to think about Garrett. He was not an irrational man. He was not given to mysticism, or astrology, or beliefs in paranormal powers, dreams that foretold the future, or anything like that. If anything, he was a skeptic, in the true sense of the word. He questioned everything, always with an open mind but needing to be logically convinced. Garrett just did not take anything on faith.

And yet, it was clear he believed what he had said. Believed it deeply, so that it caused him pain.

Garrett came into the front room and sat in the chair closest to Janet. She put the book aside and looked at him.

"I made a casserole," he said. "Should be ready in about an hour." He breathed deeply once. "Janet, do you think . . . we've never discussed one explanation. We've discreetly avoided it," he said, smiling. "But do you think I've lost touch with reality? That I've lost my sanity?"

"Do you believe that?"

"No." The answer was firm and sure.

"I don't think so either," Janet said. "But it *is* a possibility, and has to be considered."

He nodded, and they were silent for a long time. Janet sipped at her drink, and finished it while Garrett stared into the dying fire. He got up from the chair and added a log.

"A god?" she said.

Garrett shrugged. "I know how it sounds. But I am a . . . presence above them, and they are praying to me." He stood and turned to her. "I *know* it, Janet, deep in my gut. There is no doubt in me. I may not be helping them, but they are praying to me, and I am their god."

Janet slowly shook her head. "You're a human being, Garrett; you don't have any special powers. Isn't it more likely that you have made some kind of contact, and are just observing this world?"

He looked away and into the fire. "You think I want to be a god? You think I have a choice?"

The silence returned. Janet shook her head slowly, watching him. "You are not a god," she said.

For the first time, it is night.

He can barely distinguish the outlines of the village dwellings below. In the dim moonlight it appears that most of the villagers are asleep.

A huge fire burns in the riverbed. Tending the fire is the tall, black-furred being. He is placing the ends of long pieces of wood into the fire, forming a circle of the pieces around the edge. The ends seem to be coated with something flammable, for as each one is placed into the fire, a small burst of flame and sparks erupts from it. Fifty or sixty of these lengths of wood ring the fire.

The dark one picks up one of the

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lengths, a torch now with one end burning brightly, and walks along the riverbed, downstream twenty paces. He plants the torch in the dry earth. The torch burns steadily, flames tossing slightly in a breeze. He returns to the fire, picks up another piece, and carries it farther downstream, where he plants it as far from the first as the first is from the fire.

The next time, he picks up two torches and plants them still farther downstream, one at a time, equally spaced.

The lone figure continues the procedure, carrying two torches at a time, hiking farther downstream with each trip to plant them. From above, it seems the course of the river is being slowly charted by fire, a long, curving string of equidistant torches making the way.

Eventually the course of the riverbed is traced by fire all the way to the dry lake. Once the concluding torch is planted, the black-furred being returns to the fire, picks up as many of the torches as he can safely carry, then bears them to the edge of the lake. He plants them carefully in a small circle at the end of the line of torches.

All the torches continue to burn without signs of fading. The lone, dark figure paces about the circle of fire at the lake's edge, weaving from side to side. After a time he steps inside the circle, raises arms and face to the sky, and howls. When there is no answer, he hangs his head, then suddenly drops to a kneeling position above a dark patch of earth within the flames and sticks a finger, then his entire hand, into the ground. Wearily, he shakes his head from side to side, then plunges his face and mouth to the ground. He buries his face deeper, deeper, then abruptly pulls free and stares up at the night sky. His mouth, nose, and tiny eyes are covered with dry, dry sand.

The dark one rises slowly to his feet, holds out two open palms, then violently spits into the sand at his feet.

Garrett woke coughing, unable to breathe. He pushed himself up into a sitting position, his mouth and throat dry and gritty. He gasped for air, and felt Janet reach for him as he continued to cough. After a minute or two, the coughing subsided, and he breathed easier. Garrett wiped his mouth and felt sand on his fingers.

He looked down at his hand, then felt the inside of his mouth with his tongue. More sand. He turned and saw flecks of sand on his pillow, the sheet. He held out his hand to Janet, thrusting it at her.

"Sand! Tell me this isn't real! I've got sand in my mouth, down my throat, and where the hell did it all come from? From a godforsaken world, that's where!" He pounded his hand on the pillow and turned from her to pick up the water pitcher. He

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started to fill his glass, then stopped and stared at the pitcher, at the clear, bright water. Rage and frustration swelled inside him, pressuring for release, and for the first time in his life he was afraid he would take it out on Janet. He swung the pitcher back, then heaved it violently against the far wall. The glass shattered, and water sprayed over the wall and floor. Garrett buried his head in his hands and sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, pressing his palms as hard as possible against his skull.

Garrett had almost completely stopped talking to her. She had tried to offer another explanation for the sand — that they were near the park and sandy ground — but he would not listen. He spent most of the days out walking, though Janet did not know where he went. He napped in the afternoons, went to bed quite early, and slept late. He stopped fixing meals, so Janet took over the cooking, though neither of them ate much any longer. Garrett had the dreams every time he slept now, and she felt he was trying to remain permanently asleep, in a constant state of dreaming.

She nearly moved out twice, certain she could not take it any longer, but had been unable to leave him alone. Now she simply waited for it to stop, or for Garrett to deteriorate to a point where he would need to be committed somewhere for care.

When, one day, he did talk to her at length, she was taken by surprise.

Garrett had built up a fire himself, then asked her to come into the front room so he could talk to her. His tone and manner seemed rational, as if nothing odd were happening to him.

"First," he began, "I want to apologize. I can imagine what you've been through, and you don't deserve it. But I can't do anything about it. I'm not going to try to convince you that anything's going to change. Nothing will. If anything, this is all going to get worse."

"Do you know of something that's going to happen?"

Garrett shook his head. "No. You probably won't understand, but I wouldn't end this now even if I could. Not in the way you're thinking. I . . . I feel responsible. Responsible for lives. They are dying because of me."

Janet closed her eyes and shook her head. She did not want to go into that anymore.

"All right," Garrett said. "I'll let that part of it be. But there is one thing I need to say. Something I need you to promise me."

Janet opened her eyes and looked at him. "Go ahead."

"If anything happens to me, and I end up in a hospital on life-support machines, or something like that, well, I know we've talked about this before, and we both felt we didn't want to be kept alive by machines, not in the long run. That if one of us were in

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that position, we would want the other to have the doctors disconnect the life-support systems."

"What's going to happen, Garrett?"

"I don't know, I told you. But if something does, I want you to promise me you *won't* have them disconnect the life-support. I want to be kept alive. I *have* to be kept alive."

"Garrett, tell me what's going to happen."

"Promise me, Janet."

"Garrett. . . ."

"Janet."

They lapsed into silence. After a long time, Janet nodded to him. Yes, she said silently. I promise.

The promise received, Garrett stood and went into the bedroom. Janet sat watching the fire, drained and empty, certain now that she had finally lost him.

He has done it.

Almost.

High white clouds move serenely across the sky, and the furred beings stagger out from their dwellings to stare up at the clouds. In shock, in awe, they lope down to the riverbed, stand in the middle, and face upstream as if expecting water to appear.

The black-furred one remains aloof, staring up at the sky. There is no rain, no hint of moisture; Garrett has not managed that yet, and the solitary figure below him seems to recognize that.

Soon, Garrett thinks. *I promise.*

It is almost as if the dark one hears him, and does not believe, for once again he turns his head to the side and fiercely spits precious water to the ground before turning away from the sky and clouds to return to the village.

The contacts ceased.

Garrett went into a low-key, barely contained panic. He had been gaining control over his sleep, more each day so he was able to move at will in and out of the dream state that brought him to his world. He was even gaining control of the world itself, enough to create clouds, and before long he would bring rain; he was certain of it. But now. . . .

He had planned to will himself into a permanent, comalike state, so he'd remain in constant contact with his world. Then he could fully become their god and save them. But if he could not get back, he could not bring them rain. They would die. He had to do something, and it had to be soon.

But what had happened? What was wrong?

There were no answers.

Once again, Janet nearly moved out.

Garrett's dreams had stopped, and for a few days she had hoped everything would return to normal, but instead the situation worsened. Now

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Garrett had trouble getting to sleep for even hour at a time. He started drinking more heavily, and while the drinking often put him to sleep, the sleep did not bring the dreams he wanted. The Seconals prescribed for him were no better. So he spent most of the days half drunk, trying to sleep, occasionally jogging or running to tire himself out. Nothing worked.

But Janet stayed. She stayed, and she kept the house together, cooked and made sure he ate, and held him when he burst into tears of frustration, mumbling about the deaths he was causing. Janet became convinced Garrett *had* finally lost touch with reality, but still she could not bring herself to have him carted away like some helpless animal.

Then one day he stopped drinking and stopped taking the sleeping pills. He still spoke only infrequently to her, but he started eating more regularly, began to exercise, and stopped trying to sleep all day. Both physically and mentally, Garrett seemed to be pulling himself together, and when he had his first full night's undisturbed sleep in weeks, Janet began to think their ordeal was over.

Then the dream returned.

They are dying.

One of the young ones is discovered dead beside a pile of rock, and the villagers gather around her. There is a hesitancy before acting, as if they are giving the young female a moment of mourning. The black-furred one whispers a few words, makes several motions in the air with his hands, then takes a knife and proceeds to cut into the dead youth. Two others hold bowls as the blood is drained, the precious liquid saved. When all the blood has been drained, the dark one begins to skin and carve the flesh.

Garrett wants to stop looking, to turn away so he does not have to watch. But he cannot, because he is their god, and a god sees all.

A fire has been built in the nearest cooking pit, and a large grill has been set up over it. The villagers crowd around the fire. Smoke rises from the grill as the meat is placed upon it.

Not once have any of his people looked up to him in either prayer or anger; it is as if he no longer exists. There are no clouds in the sky, no traces of moisture in the air. Garrett feels worthless again, an abandoned, impotent god.

There was only once chance to save his people.

Garrett had no time to regain control over his sleep and dream states. It would take weeks, and they would all be dead by then.

He fingered one of the Seconal capsules spread out on the nightstand. He put it in his mouth, drank some water, and swallowed the capsule. Garrett swallowed another, then sat

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without moving for several minutes.

He had worked it out as closely as had been possible. The amount of Seconal he would take should put him deeply into a coma, but as long as Janet acted quickly, it shouldn't kill him. Once in a coma, Garrett felt certain that, at a subconscious level, he would be able to maintain the state. As long as he was hooked up to a life-support system, he would be fine.

Garrett swallowed more of the Seconals. He waited again, looking out the window at the dim light of the hidden quarter moon.

Janet. That was what hurt most, what he had done to her, and what she still had to go through. In the past few weeks, he had thought too little of her, had taken her for granted in many ways. If it could have been different . . . but he knew he did not have a choice. She was strong, and she would survive. But this was the only chance his *people* had to survive.

Garrett took the remaining Seconals and finished off the water. He set the alarm clock and put the letter securely atop it. The letter was for Janet. It told her what he had done, what she had to do, and reminded her of her promise.

He was beginning to feel drowsy, but that might be just his state of mind rather than the Seconal. Garrett lay back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. The room was cold, and he wrapped himself in an afghan.

Eventually his entire body began to feel heavy, as though he were sinking into the bed. He did not fight it, did not try to move, or stay awake. It would be soon.

He would bring rain to his people. Garrett felt quite certain of that now, and he welcomed the heavy drifting into sleep. He would bring rain, and he would save their lives.

It is nearly dawn. Janet sat in the chair at the foot of the hospital bed, very much awake though she had not slept all night. The lights on the wall monitors moved silently in regular patterns — blue, green, white. There were no red warning lights, no sounds indicating danger.

Garrett's face looked relaxed, though occasionally it twisted as if he were in anguish. She could not tell if he was dreaming.

She still did not believe he had been in contact with another world, but she hoped that, at least in his own mind, he had succeeded in getting there. And she would keep her promise to him, would never let them disconnect the life-support systems as long as she had a choice.

She had adjusted to the distant quality about him when they had first met; later she had adjusted to his long absences during his space missions and training sessions; and now she would adjust to this as well, no matter how long it went on.

When the sun made its first appear-

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ance in the window, Janet rose from the chair and left to return home to sleep.

They are praying to him again.

They are praying for the rain to stop.

It has rained for twenty-three days now, never letting up day or night. The river is swollen, flooding periodically, the lake is already above its full level and still rising. The village has been washed away, and many of the villagers with it. Those who survive have moved away from the river and into the dead forest.

But the forest, too, is flooding, and there is no solid earth on which to settle or build. The black-furred being is leading them all on a long trek towards higher land, but the nearest mountains are weeks away. It seems extremely unlikely that, unless the rain stops, any of them will survive to reach even the foothills.

Three times each day the dark one halts the march and leads the villagers in prayer. Garrett knows their prayers are useless. He has lost all control, if he ever really had any. Janet was right. He is not a god.

He watches helplessly as his people die, as they pray in vain to him. They push on through earth that has become swamp, through newly formed lakes and rivers and uprooted trees, And each time they pray to him, Garrett prays as well, prays to any god who can hear him; prays he will die so that his people will live.

The rains continue to pour from the darkened sky.

With thanks to B.G.

Coming soon

Next month: **Robert F. Young's** last story, a gripping SF adventure, "The Giant, The Colleen, and the Twenty-one Cows." "Out of the Cradle" by **Mary Caraker**, science fiction from a fresh, and remarkably good, new voice.

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In which Reg Bretnor's Papa Schimmelhorn makes his first appearance here since "Papa Schimmelhorn's Yang" (March 1978). You'll recall that the huge, white-bearded genius is something of a ladies man, who is here driven to get to know an attractive new neighbor, even if rumor has it that she is a witch.

Nobelist Schimmelhorn

BY
REGINALD BRETNOR

Had Papa Schimmelhorn not fallen into such deep disgrace, the most traumatic episode in his long and largely misspent life might never have occurred. Almost certainly, he would have reacted to Little Anton's outrageous proposal, not as a compliment to his genius, but as an insult to his mature masculinity and sexual prowess. However, he *was* in disgrace — with Mama Schimmelhorn, though that had been pretty much par for the course throughout their more than six decades of married life, but also with (a) his employer, Heinrich Luedesing, whose patience had been tried to the breaking point by the interminable complaints of angry husbands, jealous lovers, and protective parents — something scarcely conducive to the smooth running of the Luedesing Cuckoo Clock Factory, where he had for many years been foreman; (b) Pastor Hundhammer and his wife, who had again caught him in the choir loft with Ms. Dora Grossapfel, whose well-filled stretch pants were so readily removable; and (c) Mama Schimmelhorn's bosom friend Mrs. Laubenschneider, who vas Pennsylvania Deutsch und an expert on vitches und shpells und hexes, and who had done her best to warn him against a Ms. Morva Poldragon, who had recently moved in a few houses down the street, and whom he had been unable to get off his mind from the moment of her arrival. Unimpressed by his great stature, huge white beard, and enormous muscles, she had displayed only annoyance at his efforts to gain her attention.

Mrs. Laubenschneider had informed him solemnly that Ms. Poldragon was not just a witch, but a most dangerous witch, whose mama

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was descended from a long line of notorious witches in Salem, Massachusetts, and whose father was from Cornwall, which — as everybody knew — was full of witches.

Papa Schimmelhorn, mentally undressing the subject of their conversation, listened with only half an ear. His mind's eye showed him a lady very different from the usual run of his pretty pussycats, for Morva Poldragon was tall and dark and svelte, looking indeed like a nicely fleshed-out and sun-ripened Vampira. The idea of her being a witch and a malefic one struck him as utterly absurd, and he said as much.

"Dot iss shtupid!" he declared. "Vitcjes are nodt young und predty. They are old bags vith broomshticks! Eferybody knows. Also, a vitch vould nodt vork ind der French restaurant of old Mme. Gargousse, *nicht wahr*?"

Insulted, Mrs. Laubenschneider ruffled her feathers and replied that witches also had to eat, that they sometimes kept a low profile for their own dark reasons, and whereas she had been trying to spare poor Mama tidings of his misbehavior, now she would have to reveal all. Then she turned on her heel, gathered her skirts, and stormed off to keep her tea date with Mama and Mrs. Hundhammer. The tongue-lashing he received on Mama's return was a record breaker, punctuated as always by jabs from the sharp point of her black umbrella, and only when she broke to use the bathroom was he able to escape.

It was not in his nature, when in disgrace with fortune and men's (and women's) eyes, to all alone beweep his outcast state. Instead, he always sought refuge in his basement workshop, among a miscellany of ingenious cuckoo clocks of his own contrivance (many of them X-rated), and to unbosom himself to his old striped tomcat Gustav-Adolf, who, on this occasion, was dining comfortably on a fat vole he had caught an hour or so previously.

"*Ach*, Gustav-Adolf," he said, shaking his head dismally. "It iss a trachedy, die old vomen like Mama und Frau Laubenschneider. Zo O.K., Frau Laubenschneider makes you a fine collar for die fleas, vith all die hex signs. But shtill she does nodt undershtand us men, und how, to keep full mit vinegar, ve must chase predty lidtle pussycats."

"*Mrrow-ow!* commented Gustav-Adolf, which, translated from the Cat, meant, "*Like fun she doesn't!*" He took another bite of vole, found it especially succulent, and purred thunderously.

"*Ja!*" Papa Schimmelhorn went on. "Die old vomen cannodt undershtand how lidtle Morva makes me feel. Gustav-Adolf, you should only see!" Lovingly, his big hands outline first breasts, then bottom, in the air. "You cannodt imachine! She iss chust like—"

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But before he could tell his friend what Ms. Morva was really like, there was a soft knock on the basement door.

His heart leaped. Could it be? Had she finally realized what she was missing and come seeking him?

He was at the door in nothing flat. He threw it open. Little Anton Fledermaus, his grandnephew, was standing there. In the street behind him stood an imperial yellow Rolls-Royce with Hong Kong license plates and a liveried Chinese chauffeur, for Little Anton had come a long way since Papa Schimmelhorn, a few years previously, had fetched him as a dowdy, pimpled teenager from Ellis Island, where he had just arrived from Switzerland. Now, as head of Special Services for Pêng-Plantagenet, the world's greatest conglomerate, he sported a Savile Row suit, an old school tie (courtesy of Horace Pêng and Richard Plantagenet, both of whom were entitled to wear one), and a carefully nurtured English accent.

For a moment, Papa Schimmelhorn's face mirrored his disappointment.

Little Anton smiled. "Ah, dear Great-uncle, you don't seem awfully glad to see me. Let me guess — could you possibly have been expecting a lovely lady?"

Papa Schimmelhorn heaved a mighty sigh. "Come in, Lidtle Anton, come in. Or course I am glad to see you, alvays. It iss chust — vell, I haff troubles."

"I know," replied his grandnephew. "I've been upstairs with Mama for the past hour. She just left. She told me everything — well, *almost* everything."

Closing the door, Papa Schimmelhorn led him past his 1922 Stanley Steamer touring car (painted British Racing Green) into the workshop proper. "Und now," he said, pulling out two rickety cane-bottomed chairs, "you sit. I tell der rest."

For the next ten minutes, he discoursed eloquently on Morva Poldragon's charms — on those obvious to all and those even more important ones that, presumably, would be revealed only in her bed. "You vould nodt beliefe!" he exclaimed. "Tvice in der efening, for vun second maybe, I haff seen her eyes — *mein Gott!* I think in der dark they shine! Red, Lidtle Anton, like der Siameser cat! Can you imachine? In der night, aftervard, on der pillow next to you? How romantic!"

Little Anton suppressed the urge to say to him, Ms. Morva sounded downright creepy. "Surely," he said, "you're joking?"

Papa Schimmelhorn assured him that he was not, and then proceeded to recount the simple campaign he had so far pursued. She vas, he declared, playing hard to get. Tvice she had ordered him to — how do you say — *bug off.* But he was in no way discouraged. Maybe she had been talking to Mrs. Luedesing, oder Mrs.

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Hundhammer, maybe efen Mama. "Die old vomen! Lidtle Anton, they think she iss a vitch — such nonzense! A vitch vith degres from die Universität! Maybe in chenetics. She vorks for Mme. Gargousse at der Frencher restaurant vith all die frogs."

"You mean *La Grenouille d'Or?*"

"*Ja, ja!*"

"My word! It's absolutely famous for its frogs' legs. We've even heard of it in Hong Kong. It's mentioned in the *Guide Michelin* — they said they wished it were in France. Doesn't she raise all the frogs herself? That's probably why she hired your little Morva, to breed even better ones. I must take you and Mama there while I'm in New Haven."

"You are shmart. Lidtle Anton. Probably dot iss vhy my Morva vorks there. Such fine frogs — often now Gustav-Adolf goes to der pond to hunt."

"*Mmmrow!*" rumbled Gustav-Adolf.

Little Anton patted him on the head. "*Le chat gourmet,*" he commented approvingly.

On the wall, one of the larger cuckoo clocks suddenly popped its doors to exhibit three lusty cuckoos celebrating the erotic antics of a satyr and two plump nymphs, and to inform the world that it was four o'clock.

The performance appeared to cheer Papa Schimmelhorn, and Little Anton decided to strike while the iron was, if not hot, at least warming up.

"Forget your troubles, revered Great-uncle," he said. "I have a proposition for you — and it's not just me but Pêng-Plantagenet — though it *was* my idea. We can all, as you Americans put it, make a bundle."

Papa Schimmelhorn shook his head. "I do nodt vant to make a bundle, Lidtle Anton. I haff mein goot chob vith Heinrich Luedesing — soon he forgets und I get it back — und ve haff plenty of money in der bank, efen in Schvitzerland."

Little Anton's frank and open features — features that so deluded Mama Schimmelhorn — betrayed none of the cunning that had enabled him to secure his position with Pêng-Plantagenet and thrive in it.

He leaned forward. He tapped Papa Schimmelhorn's knee confidentially. "I know that you aren't broke," he said, "but, my dear Papa, can you get at that money without Mama knowing?"

Papa Schimmelhorn was forced to shake his head. "Maybe if it iss fife dollars only," he said.

"Very well. If you accept my proposition — *our* proposition, Pêng-Plantagenet'll see you're paid in cash, in hundred-dollar bills, *lots* of them. They can go a long way with pretty pussycats — even pretty pussycats loaded with degrees. Just suppose you could treat her to more money in a week than she makes at the froggery in a year?"

Papa Schimmelhorn frowned. He

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thought of his innumerable amatory successes. "All my life, Lidtle Anton," he replied huffily, "I never haff to pay for it — not vunce!"

"Come, come!" his grandnephew answered. "Don't look at it this way. All you'll be doing is helping her to overcome her — what shall we call it? — her maiden modesty."

"Dot iss possible," Papa Schimmelhorn acknowledged, a little grudgingly.

"Very well, then." Little Anton lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Listen! Here's the deal! You've heard about those Nobel Prize winners, haven't you? How they've been contributing to sperm banks so the world can have more geniuses? Of course you have. Well, ask yourself one question — What have all those Nobel Prize winners ever done? What have they done that compares to your invention of a time machine? To your making a *gnurr-pfeife* to bring gnurrs from the voodvork oudt — creatures from another dimension? To how you turned lead into gold? How many of *them* could've done it?"

"Nodt vun, I think," said Papa Schimmelhorn modestly, "but remember, Lidtle Anton, I haff nodt vun a Nobel Prize, und I am a chenius only in der subconscience, chust as Herr Doktor Jung said. Odervise I am shtupid. Die shperm bankers vould nefer take mein deposit."

"Of course they wouldn't, sage Great-uncle. It'd be like letting a fox into the henhouse. All those Nobel laureates wouldn't be able to compete. That's why we're going to have to open your private sperm bank — you and you alone. But don't worry — Pêng-Plantagenet'll take care of all the merchandising. My word, we'll have rich, ambitious women lined up from here to Taipei!"

All the implications of the proposal were beginning to percolate lingering visions of Ms. Morva. "You mean I vill haff to become a Shviss shperm banker all by meinself?" Papa Schimmelhorn muttered slowly.

Little Anton's small blue eyes twinkled greedily. "You hit the nail on the head, Papa!" he replied. "Think about it. Nothing could be simpler!"

"All by meinself?" Papa Schimmelhorn repeated. "I do it *by meinself?*" He sat back in his chair, glaring ferociously. "*Ach*, Lidtle Anton, you should be ashamed! Nefer! Nodt since I am tvelve years old!"

"Papa! Papa!" pleaded Little Anton. "You owe it to the world. If all those Nobel Prize winners can do it, why can't you?"

"*Donnerwetter!* They are old men vith no more vinegar, so they cannodt chase anymore die pussycats. For them iss different. For me, Lidtle Anton, *nefer!*"

Little Anton was not dismayed. Quietly, he played what he hoped would be his ace in the hole. "But surely you wouldn't have to manage *all* by yourself, would you, Great-

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uncle? You, of all people, ought to be able to find one or two young ladies to — shall we say, give you a helping hand?"

Papa Schimmelhorn wrinkled his nose disgustedly. Once more he started to protest. Then, suddenly, his imagination brought back the image of Ms. Morva, and the idea came to him that, indeed, no one could tell what such preliminary dalliance might lead to. He recalled the several occasions on which she had rebuffed his advances. He remembered his recent humiliation by Mrs. Laubenschneider and Mama, the Hundhammers and the Luedesings. And it was true, as his clever grandnephew had pointed out, that some women who reacted coldly even to such splendid displays of masculinity as his could be softened up by gifts of diamonds, emeralds, rubies, by Mercedes-Benzes, by old-fashioned hard cash. For a minute or two, he batted these ideas back and forth, his resolve crumbling. Finally, making it plain that he was inquiring only out of curiosity, he asked to what extent Pêng-Plantagenet might be prepared to underwrite the project?

Little Anton reached into the inside pocket of his modish jacket and brought out a thick envelope. "Twenty thousand as a starter," he replied, "and all in hundred-dollar bills. Will that be enough?" He looked at his great-uncle a little apprehensively. "You aren't thinking of your Ms. Morva, are you? Even if she's not a witch, if her eyes really do glow red in the dark — well, you'd better have a care. At least find out more about her — you know, what makes her tick, what she really wants."

"Don'dt vorry," Papa Schimmelhorn assured him, reaching for the envelope. "I think maybe iss enough to shtart. If I need more, I call collect in Hong Kong. Lidtle Morva iss herself a scientist. I tell her how ve do der great scientific experiment vith Nobel Prizers." He winked, subtle as a serpent. "Maybe I tell her how to fix it so someday she gets der prize herself."

"That would be nice," said Little Anton, very dubiously. "But don't try to call me in Hong Kong till I get back. I've got important business in Chicago and Denver and Los Angeles, and I'll be checking with you again on my way to London in about a week. Then you can tell me how things are going, and I'll get a lab set up for you."

"A lab?" Papa Schimmelhorn was puzzled.

"Absolutely!" laughed Little Anton. "Just a small one — for our stock-in-trade."

Even in Berkeley, where she had taken her M.S. in genetic engineering, Morva Poldragon was always considered slightly strange. Her attire was always almost insultingly formal; she invariably refused to take part in such

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intramural sports as antinuke demonstrations and setting fire to academic buildings; her occasional live-in boyfriends, some for a weekend or two, others for as long as a fortnight, either were faculty members or at least looked as though they were; and she had an inexplicable way of discouraging any normal, healthy lad who had his sights set on tumbling her — afterward they never seemed to know exactly what had happened.

The truth of the matter, as Mrs. Laubenschneider had divined, was that Morva was indeed a witch — and no common, run-of-the-mill witch at that. An ancestress of hers in Cornwall had, during the reign of King James II, been burned at the stake for turning a fellow townswoman into a goose and threatening to serve her at a Walpurgis Night get-together. Others of her kinfolk, both in the Old Country and in Massachusetts (where they had come with the earliest settlers), had at various times been hanged, subjected to public obloquy in the stocks, driven out of town, or tarred and feathered for such misdemeanors as cursing cattle, blighting crops, and inflicting wens and warts and itches on the children of their enemies. Others, the more successful practitioners — and they were far more numerous — had flourished in the practice of the law, politics, and currency manipulation if they were men, or as mistresses of the rich and powerful if they were women.

Morva, having a scientific bent, talked the matter over with her aged grandmother, two uncles, and an aunt, all of whom were adepts in the Craft, and they agreed with her that anyone skilled both in witchcraft and genetic engineering would be thrice armed, the two disciplines obviously complementing one another. Wisely, they counseled her to shun the blandishments of large, sophisticated corporations after completing her education, but instead to seek a niche where she could do her own research — in her own interest.

"Morva dear," her grandmother had warned her, "no matter how much they offer you, those big corporations won't provide you with an environment where you can perform really *important* experiments — you know, like producing changelings or having somebody give birth to a real homunculus instead of a common baby. My, I do wish I were your age and had your opportunities — everything we've always done or tried to do, going to so much trouble with all our spells and evocations, would be so much easier."

So Morva, after leaving the university, had waited for her opportunity and finally had answered Mme. Gargousse's ad for a geneticist.

Madame had placed it in a genetics trade journal, and she had answered Morva's reply by phone. All she wanted, she declared, was to develop the largest, healthiest, and tastiest frogs

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in all the world — far finer than the frogs of France or Louisiana. She was, she said, the widow of the master chef Aristide Gargousse, creator of a thousand memorable recipes using *les grenouilles*, author of learned papers on such subjects as *The Comestible Frog, Its Care and Preparation; The Frog, Acme of Delicate Feasting;* and *The Frog in Sickness and in Health, a Restaurateur's Manual.* She listened to Morva's academic qualifications and offered her a stipend that, though a bit less than a major corporation might have paid her, was more than adequate; and Morva immediately accepted.

Ms. Poldragon had no difficulty in finding a convenient apartment. She simply told the other members of her coven, and in a day or two she had it, complete with moderate rental and a lease. Mme. Gargousse, who had expected to be put to a little trouble in housing her new employee, was delighted. She at once invited Morva to have dinner with her at *La Grenouille d'Or.* They feasted, of course, on frogs' legs, chosen by Madame from a menu featuring perhaps a dozen recipes of her late, great husband's, and preceded by a rich frog *velouté.*

The restaurant itself was on the first floor of a handsome stone residence dating back to the late eighteenth century, the upper stories of which she herself inhabited.

"Truly, here I achieve my husband's dream," she declared. "Imagine! Here in America, of all places! I have had to make compromises, *naturellement. Par example—*" She pointed at a huge tank against one wall, in which perhaps a hundred, perhaps two hundred frogs were swimming, happily unaware of the fate awaiting them. "That is for the *nouveaux riches*, you understand? They pay to pick their own. Only for the cognoscenti, the intelligentsia, do we save the finest ones, like those that we ourselves shall eat. For the rabble, we have frozen frogs' legs from Korea, from Taiwan; they do not know the difference. But fortunately the Yale College is nearby—" She sighed. "—not the Sorbonne, certainly, but still, the people are not quite illiterate, for which one must be grateful, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Ah, oui! Mais certainement!" Morva agreed.

Madame chuckled, and the golden frog brooch on her mighty bosom made swimming motions. "Ah, we shall get along famously, you and I," she said. "I can see you are a young lady of intelligence and—" She had noticed how the eyes of her male customers had followed Morva. "—of course of good moral character. But tell me, why do you keep those beautiful green glasses on?"

Morva explained that much study had made her eyes exceptionally sensitive.

"*Pauvre petite!* Now, working for me, with my frogs, you will not have

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to strain them so much. You will have your own laboratory, in a little building by the *grenouillière,* my frog pond, and you can illuminate it any way you wish. Tomorrow I will show you. We treat our frogs kindly here—" Her formidable jaw relaxed in a sentimental smile. "—yes, indeed! When we kill them, they feel no pain. My husband always used to say, 'Philomène, our frogs are aristocrats. They deserve an aristocratic death.' He invented the small guillotine we use. Pouf! It is over in an instant. Often, when we prepare a banquet, I take my knitting and sit within the kitchen and watch. After dinner you shall see."

Morva, watching the small batrachian reign of terror Madame's employees put on for her benefit, expressed her approval of the humanitarian instinct that had prompted it, and Madame almost purred with satisfaction. "*Ma chêrie,*" she said, "nevaire could I be cruel to them, my frogs. They are such dear little creatures!"

Next morning she introduced Morva to the frog pond. It was located not far from the restaurant and was fed by a small creek that, normally forced underground by civic development, surfaced there momentarily. It was a big pond, surrounded by cattails, flowering bushes, and a high chain-link fence topped menacingly with barbed wire. Next to it stood a small, very modern building.

"Here is where you will work," proclaimed Madame. "Only in the daytime will anyone else come here, Petit Pierre, whom I brought from France. He is a frog-sexer, even the tadpoles. Always he can pick out the males, a secret in his family for many generations. He comes twice a week, no more often." She unlocked the door. "Behold!"

Morva beheld a surprisingly well-equipped laboratory — it even had a Japanese electron microscope. "Oh Madame Gargousse!" she cried. "How splendid! I'm sure I'll be very happy working here."

And so, for several months, she did work happily. She set up effective spells to protect the pond from owls and other predators, and, combining modern science with a generous dollop of magic, she succeeded in breeding several new strains of frogs quicker to mature, hardier than their predecessors, and with much meatier legs. The fact that Madame started to express dissatisfaction because they weren't much bigger than ordinary bullfrogs didn't trouble her. She had faith in her expertise and her eventual success.

For a long time the only thorn in her flesh was Papa Schimmelhorn.

Subtlety was not his long suit, but he started out in a small way, smiling at her in the street or in the supermarket, flexing his huge muscles for her, commenting to her on the weath-

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er, advising her to haff a nice day. Mildly amused, at first she had responded simply by looking through him, but instead of being discouraged, he had advanced to the next step: ringing her doorbell apologetically to offer her small bouquets of posies, personally picked from neighbor's gardens, or little bags of gumdrops and hard candy. On each occasion, she glared at him and closed the door in his face.

Getting definitely irritated, she asked a few questions about him in the neighborhood, and got a thorough, gossipy rundown. It did not make her want to improve their acquaintanceship. Then, noticing the hex signs painted on the Schimmelhorn residence, she asked more questions, found out about Mrs. Laubenschneider, and guessed quite rightly that her own connection with the Craft would soon become the subject at least of rumor, which complicated the situation.

She phoned her grandmother, who advised her sensibly to keep on ignoring the old fool — after all, he was nothing but a cuckoo-clock mechanic — and on no account to resort to witchcraft unless absolutely driven to it. "It's bad enough with the Pennsylvania Dutch biddy onto you, but as it stands, all she can do is gossip. We'll try to find out what her connections are, and whether she can do anything to hurt you if you try to put a spell on him or anything. Remember, it isn't true that because most people no longer believe in witches, things have become safer for us. They're worse, because mostly they don't fear us anymore. So you be careful, dear."

Morva took the advice to heart, and even when Papa Schimmelhorn obtained her unlisted number by bribing a young woman at the phone company and began pestering her with honeyed compliments on those features of her anatomy he found most enticing, she did nothing but hang up decisively. Finally she had her number changed. Then she began to receive syrupy greeting cards, usually with suggestive little notes in a not-too-cultivated hand, and presents brought by innocent third parties (neighborhood children, generally), all of which were dutifully sent back. Eventually he managed to get her phone number once again.

By the time Little Anton arrived with his proposal, Morva Poldragon had really had it, and to complicate matters, she could no longer really find refuge in her work, for Madame — getting impatient and lusting after fame and fortune — had started riding her about the failure of her frogs to attain the prodigious size that would make the restaurant even more famous than it was. So that if it wasn't Madame complaining, it was Papa Schimmelhorn ogling her, or phoning her at all hours, or sending her his absurd messages and presents,

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and even — on more than one occasion — managing to pinch her intimately in crowds of shoppers. Witches, like anybody else, have to have someone to confide in, and there was no one in New Haven she could prudently go to — not to Madame, certainly not to Mama Schimmelhörn (who undoubtedly had been tipped off by her friend Mrs. Laubenschneider,) not even to the police. What the hell was the use of being a Grade A, black-belt witch if she had to put up with that kind of nonsense? Grandmother or no grandmother, she told herself, she was going to put a stop to it, even if she had to put a stop to Papa Schimmelhorn permanently.

The opportunity was not long in coming. As soon as Little Anton had proceeded on his way, Papa Schimmelhorn stashed most of the twenty thousand carefully away in a side pocket of the Stanley and, with Gustav-Adolf on his lap, sat down to concoct his plan of campaign.

"Ve must be very clefer, Gustav-Adolf," he declared. "For a vhile, no more lidtle pinchings in der rear, und no more phone calls late at night so she gets mad. Ve must be all business, like die regular Shviss bankers."

"Y' betcha boots!" rumbled Gustav-Adolf, in Cat.

"Maybe I shtart tomorrow, vhen Mama goes to church. First I send Morva a nice letter, full vith apologies. I tell her maybe I am a dirty old man like Mama says, but my heart iss in der right place. At first I tell her nodding aboudt der shperm bank — only aboudt Lidtle Anton und Pêng-Panflageolet und how I am a chenius. I tell her how I haff heard she also iss a chenius, in chenetics, und how Pêng-Panflageolet shtarts a great scientific program und vants to hire her."

Gustav-Adolf mrrowed approvingly, and for the next hour they discussed various aspects of the plan. Then Papa Schimmelhorn went upstairs, stole some of Mama's best notepaper from her desk, and settled down to compose his missive.

It was an extraordinary document. He groveled. He apologized repeatedly. He explained how, despite his advanced age, he still was not immune to the allure of women who were truly beautiful, and how sometimes his excess of enthusiasm forced him beyond the bounds of decorum and social protocol. He trusted she would forgive him, or at least condescend to listen to the Pêng-Plantagenet proposal. And in the meantime, would she accept the poor present he was sending her as a token of his atonement? He ended it. "Lieber Fräulein, I shtay alvays your sincere und true friend," and signed it formally with his full name, *August Schimmelhorn*. After a moment's thought, he added, "P.S. It is pronounced Owgoost, but you can call me Papa." Then he tacked on another P.S. asking her please to

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send her answer by the small boy who would deliver it together with his present, and not by mail or telephone because such matters Mama would not understand.

Next morning, after a serene night's sleep, he waited until Mama had departed, then sallied out to the nearest shopping center and purchased, first a pair of designer jeans tight enough to leave no doubts as to his manly figure, and then a brace of apple-cheeked, simpering plastic gnomes, manufactured in South Korea after a long-lost Black Forest design. One was seated on an obese mushroom; the other held an emormous amphibian that could have been either a frog or toad, and to which the gnome seemed devoted. Papa Schimmelhorn attached a card to them on which he had written, *For der frog pond.* They were, he told himself, a much more tactful gift than diamonds would have been, or black lace negligees, or even expensive chocolates. However, he finally did add a sentimental touch: a demure spray of virginal snowdrops.

Coming home well satisfied, he summoned a local twelve-year-old named Chauncey and paid him three dollars to make the delivery, exacting a solemn promise — Scout's honor —never to let a word of it leak back to Mama.

"It iss Sunday," he told Gustav-Adolf, "so lidtle Morva probably iss home, und Chauncey iss a goot boy. Maybe I hear predty soon."

For two hours he fretted impatiently, wondering if Chauncey hadn't been able to find the house, or if he'd been seduced from his important mission by some cute feminine playmate, but eventually the lad returned, having delayed en route to spend the three dollars on space games at an arcade.

"That's some chick, Pop," he commented, handing over a pale blue envelope. "Kinda weird — but, *woo! woo!*"

Papa Schimmelhorn seized the envelope eagerly and tore it open.

"*Ja! Voo! Voo!*" he cried joyously as he read it, his libido so stimulated that he gave Chauncey an extra two dollars, reminded him of his promise, and sent him on his way.

Dear Mr. Schimmelhorn, (he read)

I have of course heard of Peng-Plantagenet, and would of course be interested in their business proposition — if it is indeed a business proposition.

May I suggest that you come to my apartment — shall we say at eight this evening? — so that we can discuss the matter?

Sincerely,
Morva Poldragon

Papa Schimmelhorn reread this gratifying message and danced a little jig. "Shveetheart," he caroled, "I come vith bells on."

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Having decided the general nature of his fate some time before, Ms. Poldragon had taken little thought of precisely what she would do to him, except that it would be downright nasty. Casually, she had reviewed a number of alternatives that witchcraft offered her, but she hadn't made up her mind. When she received the two gnomes, the nosegay, and his message, she realized abruptly that opportunity was knocking. While she never for a moment believed that a valid business proposition would be forthcoming, she had indeed heard of Pêng-Plantagenet, and found herself mildly curious as to how anyone so crass could be mixed up with them, so she patted Chauncey maternally, gave him a Coke to occupy him while she wrote her answer, and instructed him to give it to the nice old man.

The rest of the afternoon she spent brushing up on a variety of spells, consulting certain dark works of necromancy that were the legacy of her family. Then, after a leisurely dinner, she changed into a clinging silken housecoat with an alarming décolletage and donned her large green glasses. She arranged the nosegay in a small silver vase on the coffee table, placed the two gnomes beside her fireplace, and brought out a pair of Baccarat glasses and an amber liqueur in a crystal decanter. She was quite sure her pursuer would have told no one of the visit, and that a very simple spell would ensure Chauncey's silence. From there, she decided, she'd play it by ear.

Promptly at eight, her doorbell rang. She let him wait a full minute, then opened the door abruptly. Papa Schimmelhorn stood there before her, tight jeans, huaraches, a vivid Mexican sport shirt advertising the tourist attractions of Ciudad Juárez, and a small Tyrolean hat sporting a sprig of plastic edelweiss. "*Ach, Donnerwetter!*" he exclaimed at the sight of her. "How beaudtiful!"

He received no welcoming smile. "Come in," she said coldly. "I understand you have a business proposition?"

"*Jawohl, gnadige Fräulein,*" he answered, entering. "Today I am all business, *ja.*" He put his hands in his pockets to restrain their urge to go a-wandering.

She appeared to thaw a little, smiling ever so slightly. "Well," she said, "in that case, I imagine we ought to get a little better acquainted. Perhaps—" She gestured at the coffee table and the couch. "—you'd care to have a drink or two with me before you start explaining what Pêng-Plantagenet has in mind?"

He accepted, thanking her effusively, and seated himself. To his disappointment, after pouring the liqueur, she pulled up an armchair and sat in it facing him across the table. Her gaze, through her green glasses, was unblinking.

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He raised his glass. "To luff!" he proposed gallantly.

She raised her glass in turn. "To business!"

Hastily, he nodded.

"And how is Mrs. Schimmelhorn?" she asked pleasantly.

He gulped, and replied that Mama was doing as well as could be expected, considering— On the point of saying considering that she did not understand him, he broke off prudently and told Morva how fascinating it was that she, so young and beautiful, was a real scientist vorking vith nice lidtle frogs.

"Do you like frogs, Mr. Schimmelhorn?" she asked slowly.

He drained his glass. "*Ja!* Alvays since I am a lidtle boy. So cute! Singing at night — croak, croak!"

She filled his glass again, and they made small talk. How did she like New Haven? And wasn't Mme. Gargousse an interesting person? And how did she occupy her spare time?

At that she smiled, filled his glass once more, and told him that in her spare time she studied to be a better scientist.

The liqueur, meanwhile, was going to his head. "It is *wunderschön,* der liqueur," he told her, holding his glass out again. "So varm and unlaxing."

"Good," she answered, pouring. "And now you can outline that business proposition."

A bit reluctantly, Papa Schimmelhorn leaned back and started his recital. He explained to her how he vas a chenius, and gave her a rundown on everything he had accomplished scientifically. He told her what Herr Doktor Jung had said about how on the conscious level he wasn't much better than a high-grade moron, and that his chenius vas all in der subconscience. He related how, through Little Anton, he had become involved with Pêng-Plantagenet. Then he hesitated.

"Yes?" she said. "And the business proposition?"

Papa Schimmelhorn blushed. Her gaze now seemed to be even steadier than before. He began to stammer.

She smiled sweetly. "Do go on," she encouraged him, refilling his glass once more.

He shifted uncomfortably. "You undershtand? It iss all only business?"

"Of course," she murmured.

And the whole story poured out of him, interrupted only by embarrassed coughs and hesitations and apologies. She did not interrupt him once while he was telling about the Nobel Prize winners and what they were doing for the human race, and how much better qualified he was to perform the same service, only — *natürlich* — all by himself could nodt do it. He vas a man, nodt a shmall boy. Und he had thought maybe she—

He reached into his pocket and brought out the fifty hundred-dollar bills.

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"Only for der human race ve do it!" he vowed fervently. "For der human race und for science! Yourself you are a scientist, so you undershtand!"

"I do indeed."

"*Sehr gut!*" He laughed heartily. "Dot iss vot I haff told Lidtle Anton. Imachine! Frau Laubenschneider says you are a vitch! Such silliness."

Morva Poldragon did not laugh. Very softly, she said, "Oh, but I *am* a witch. I am a very competent witch indeed."

He laughed again, a little lamely. "You make a choke!"

"Oh no, I don't!" she told him. "Not at all." Then suddenly she, too, laugh, chillingly. Moments before, during the course of his recital, inspiration had come to her, and instantly she had known what she was going to do. Now she leaned toward him.

"You," she said, in a voice unbelievably cold and cruel, "are just what everyone said you were. You are a dirty old man — and not even an ordinary one. You are an *especially* dirty old man. Well, you aren't going to be one much longer. I am going to turn you into a frog."

Papa Schimmelhorn's laugh was a decidedly enfeebled one. "P-people do nodt get turned into — into anything — *nein*. Nobody can turn anyvun into a frog. Der scientists say—"

Abruptly, she stood over him. "Try to stand up," she ordered.

He tried. He found that his legs would not obey him.

"That," she informed him, "was my preparatory potion — in the liqueur. So you will sit while I perform the necessary small ceremony—"

Lifting her arms above her head, she started chanting, and even he, in his ignorance of witchcraft, felt that she was uttering abominable words of dreadful power.

"Please—" he begged.

Suddenly, around him, through him, there was a terrible burst of light, first blinding white, then flashing out in coruscating colors. It died. He looked around. The coffee table and his glass were on a level with his eyes, and all the world was gray and black and white. He looked up at the gray and white woman towering over him; he heard her laughter ringing strangely in his ears. He tried to stand. His legs — his *hind* legs — still refused to stir.

"*Croak!*" said Papa Schimmelhorn. He repeated it dismally.

Morva reached down and patted him. "Don't worry," she said, "you're a splendid specimen. Wait just a minute—"

She left the room and returned almost instantly with a big hand mirror. "See?" she said.

Papa Schimmelhorn looked in the mirror. All he could see was an emormous bullfrog, huddling in the now empty fabric of his festive sport shirt. The fact that he was looking at by far

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the biggest bullfrog he had ever seen comforted him not at all.

"CROOAK!" he boomed.

"Hush, hush!" Morva chided him. "Be quiet now, and you can watch me change."

Slowly, she peeled off her silken housecoat, her panty hose, her brassiere. She turned, pirouetting. "How do you like me, Mr. Schimmelhorn? Perhaps you think it's a pity I'm not a girl frog? Well, don't waste your time. Frogs don't do it the way we do. My frogs especially have been genetically engineered so the boys and girls simply don't need to get together. My lady frogs lay their eggs among the lily pads, and only special gentlemen frogs come along and fertilize them. Isn't that nice?"

She put her underwear on again and donned slacks and sweater. From a closet she brought something that looked like a small cat carrier. She popped Papa Schimmelhorn, squirming feebly, into it. By this time he was thoroughly in shock. He tried to utter a protesting croak and failed.

And now, she said, "we're going calling. You're going to meet all your nice new friends."

She went on talking to him all the way down to her car, and all the way to Madame's frog pond. There she unlocked the gate and carried him to the pond's far end. She opened the door of the carrier and dragged him out.

It was a fine spring night, and a great full moon was shining. "By now your hind legs should be working," she told him; and obediently he tried them. The effort resulted in an unskilled but definite hop. "There!" she said. "In a minute or two, you'll be good as new."

She waited with him, singing a sentimental little love song. Finally she said, "Now try again."

He hopped, much more successfully, and his despairing *croak* sounded like the voice of a lost frog-soul.

She pointed at the pond in front of him. "Look," she coaxed. "Just look at those lovely lily pads!"

Papa Schimmelhorn looked. He saw lily pads — and between them, on the water's surface, glistening in the moonlight, the thousands upon thousands of new frogs' eggs.

She picked him up. "Hop to it, Nobel Prize winner!" she commanded. "Do your stuff!"

And she threw him well out into the water.

Then, chuckling, she locked the gate behind her and drove home, satisfied that she had not only disposed of an annoyance, but almost certainly also solved the problem of much larger frogs for Madame's customers.

Hardly anything is as profoundly disturbing to the male ego as being turned into a frog, and when the transformation is inflicted almost

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without warning, at a time of scarcely suppressed sexual anticipation, and by the lady responsible for the arousal, its effect is multiplied at least threefold. Papa Schimmelhorn knew rather vaguely what had happened to him, but so stunned was he that the full horror of his situation took a long time to percolate through to that conscious mind that Herr Doktor Jung had held in such low regard. On the way to the frog pond, he did not even marvel that, in his frog form, his mental faculties did not seem affected, and when Morva Poldragon chucked him out into the water, his only thought was to strike out for terra firma.

After a moment he realized that he was swimming wonderfully well, and that it was his long, powerful hind legs that, webs and all, enabled him to do so. The very idea added to his awakening despair, and when something told him, subliminally, to head for a nearby lily pad, he did so. Luckily, it was a very large lily pad, big enough to bear his weight. Clumsily, he climbed up onto it, uttered an unhappy deep-bass *crro-o-ak*, and looked around apprehensively. A huge, uncaring moon stared down at him, and all around him now, he heard the voices of his fellow frogs raised up in song. He scarcely noticed when his long tongue flicked out to capture a fat fly that had come carelessly into range. Then, for an instant, he was overcome by revulsion because it had really tasted pretty good going down.

For a time he simply sat there, absentmindedly snaffling an occasional insect. "*Lieber Gott!*" he thought. "I haff been shtupid. Fran Laubenschneider vas right. Maybe, ven I get home, I tell her I am sorry—"

Then he remembered that at the moment his chances of getting home again appeared to be precisely zero, and had he not been a frog, he would undoubtedly have emitted an unmanly sob. He began to wrestle, rather dimly, with the problem of how to escape from his predicament. There seemed to be no solution to it. His genius, wriggling around in his subconscious, came up with no ideas at all — and he realized that if it did, he lacked the equipment with which to implement them. There was no way in which he could communicate. The frogs around him certainly were not telepathic, for they paid no heed to his silent agonies. His front legs were not adapted to writing SOS's or handling scientific instruments — even if such instruments had been available.

Presently he lapsed into a dull apathy, and it was in this condition that he began to become aware of the subtle messages carried on the warm night air, messages from a thousand lady frogs telling him the surface of the pond was teeming with lovely brand-new frogs' eggs just aching for his attentions. He fought against them, but the messages kept intensifying. He began to feel obscure urges—

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Mentally he recoiled, disgusted with himself. *Vot iss?* he thought. *I am a man, not ein frog!*

He looked down at the visible part of his new anatomy, and realized how wrong he was. He *croaked* agonizingly.

The subtle, unheard siren song of the lady frogs and their to-be-completed offspring kept assailing him, and the urges they aroused kept intensifying.

Had he been his usual ebullient self, he would without a doubt have shucked them off without a thought. But he was not. His thoroughly traumatized ego was too enfeebled to cope with the assaults of spring and Mother Nature and the yearnings of his innumberable companions.

Just after midnight he hopped off the lily pad and, suffused with shame, in spite of himself began to do what any proper boy frog would have enjoyed doing. "*Gott in Himmel!*" his mind cried out. "*Iss vorse than being a Nobel Prze vinner.*"

Only the fact that frogs have no tear ducts kept him from weeping like an abandoned child.

Papa Schimmelhorn's exertions during the remainder of that night did nothing to lessen his abject misery. When he started rudely shouldering smaller male frogs aside, he found himself distressingly incapable of desisting; and as the night wore on and his activities began to exact their toll, he actually began to look forward to the occasional juicy insect that came his way. At daybreak he retired to the shore, found a secluded spot under a jutting brookside stone, and permitted himself to doze. Immediately he dreamed — and his dreams were nightmares, in which a hideous witch, in no way like Morva Poldragon, was presiding over a steaming caldron into which she had thrown such delicacies as eyes of newts, serpents' innards, and interesting parts of freshly hanged murderers. Cackling fiendishly, she was getting ready to add great gobs of frogs' eggs and, as a final touch, himself. At that point he'd wake up shuddering, and twice, before realizing that the nightmare wasn't real, he had thrown himself back into the pond. But strangely, even in these dreams, he would remember Morva and his mind would whisper, *Ach, such a predty pussycat — vot a shame.*

It probably was well for him that his conscious IQ was so low, for had he been more intelligent, he might very well have come completely unhinged mentally. As it was, when after breakfast Morva arrived with Mme. Gargousse and the small Frenchman, Petit Pierre, in tow, he made no attempt to flee, not even struggling when Morva picked him up, and uttering only an occasional pitiful *croak.*

Morva held him up proudly. "There you are, Madame!" she boasted. "Superfrog! Look at him — more

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than twice as big as any bullfrog ever — and look at the meat on those hind legs!"

"*C'est merveilleux!*" Madame shook her head in admiration and, sentimentally, caressed Papa Schimmelhorn's froggy head. "Morva, *ma chêrie,* truly you are a genius. I shall raise your salary immediately. But — but tell me—" She blushed amd simpered. "Has he — that is — *has he done his duty?*"

"*Absolument, Madame!*" Morva answered. "Hasn't he, Pierre?"

Pierre, half-swallowed in a huge roly-poly sweater and wearing a too-large cloth cap, reached out a thin yellow hand and probed Papa Schimmelhorn intimately here and there.

"I can ssure you that he has, Madame," he averred. "Ah, yes indeed! Also, if he had not, he would have been much more difficult to catch, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Morva laughed. "Well, we're going to have to see that he gets lots of nice, nutritious bugs. After all, he's just started!"

Papa Schimmelhorn's despondent *crro-oak* aroused no sympathy whatever. All three just looked at him admiringly.

"Besides," continued Morva, "the eggs he's fertilized are going to hatch much faster than ordinary frogs' eggs, and I'm sure we'll find the tadpoles just enormous."

Petit Pierre clasped his hands and rolled his eyes. "Ah," he murmured, "it is that I can hardly wait. It will be so easy to tell the sex!"

Morva put Papa Schimmelhorn down, gave him a delicate boost with the tip of an expensive shoe, and said, "Off you go, Superfrog. Have a nice orgy!"

Obediently, he hopped slowly to the water's edge and jumped in; and his three visitors, well pleased, took their departure.

The next day, and the days following, passed very much as had the first. The supply of frogs' eggs seemed absolutely unlimited, for Morva's spells had protected *la grenouillière* very efficiently against all ordinary predators. For Madame, her visits were occasions for rejoicing. She calculated the number of fine fat frogs that Papa Schimmelhorn might reasonably have been expected to have sired, how much each probably would weigh, and what she could charge her avid customers. Indeed, she told herself, she did not doubt that the day was not far off when she could truthfully advertise frog steaks, and perhaps eventually *rôtis* of frog.

As for Morva, she took every opportunity to drive verbal needles into her victim, asking him laughingly about his conquests, and extolling the epicurean delights offered by the insect world. Madame joked with her about this. "My Morva," she would say laughingly, "you speak to him as though he could understand you, is it

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not? As though he were a lover who merits your revenge."

Then Petit Pierre would snicker, and Morva would echo Madame's merriment, and poor Papa Schimmelhorn, despite all his froggy woes, would regard her shining hair, and her breasts, and her behind — *ach*, zo cute! — and, in his man's mind, sigh longingly.

A more sensitive, less resilient man might very well have been driven to self-destruction — even though that might have posed an almost insuperable problem in his frog form. Besides, on his fifth night, something happened that, even though it held out no promise of prompt rescue, at least helped him to bear up under the strain. The moon still had almost all its fullness, and he had put in a good three-hour shift without even taking a bug break, when suddenly behind him he heard a soft footfall — a footfall so soft that it was very nearly inaudible. He paused. He whirled. He saw a crouching form. Two eyes were glowing there, glowing green. Immediately he was paralyzed by an instinctive froggish fear.

The crouching figure — considerably more massive than himself — advanced. It growled gruesomely.

"*Mmmrroo-ow!*" it said. "A fine fat frog! Real tasty, too, I'll bet. Don't you move, frog! Won't do you a damn bit of good. *I'm . . . going . . . to . . . eat . . . you!*"

Abruptly, Papa Schimmelhorn realized that, though no one could actually have heard anything but *Mmmrroo-ow* he understood it all, and he also understood what had occurred. Gustav-Adolf — wearing the flea collar Mrs. Laubenschneider had woven for him, with its efficacious hex signs — had been immune to Morva's protective spells. He had come out to catch himself a bite of frog, and now all his muscles were tensing for the final, lethal leap.

"*Gustav-Adolf!*" screamed Papa Schimmelhorn in desperation. "It's me! It's Papa! I am nodt goot to eat! I am not a frog, *nein!*"

On the point of takeoff, Gustav-Adolf froze. "*Huh?*" he exclaimed in Cat. "Fer Pete's sake? You mean—?"

And Papa Schimmelhorn almost collapsed with relief to realize that, in his frog form, there was nothing to impede that ordinary telepathy between man and cat that most cat owners have at one time and another experienced. Hastily — *croak! croak! croak!* — he explained what had happened to him, how a vicked vitch had changed him, how—

"O.K.," said Gustav-Adolf. "You just hold on a minute, chum. I'm starved. Wait till I catch me another frog — a smaller one'd go down better anyhow — and I'll be with you. Hell's fire! I been tryin' to talk to you fer years, and you just been too goddamn dumb to understand. Must be something to this frog business after all!

Silently, he disappeared, and pres-

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ently, out of the ambient night, came the distressed sound of a frog voice cut off in mid-croak, followed after a bit by businesslike crunchings and a deep-throated purring. Papa Schimmelhorn, listening, was only momentarily disturbed by his fellow frog's fate and his own narrow escape from a similar end. Instead, his hopes soared irrationally. Gustav-Adolf was a link with home and Mama. Surely, somehow, he would prove to be the instrument of Papa's salvation.

He waited impatiently while his old friend ate his snack, returned, and completed the obligatory feline washing ritual.

"Hey, that was real good!" Gustav-Adolf said finally. "Y' oughta try one sometime—" He broke off, peered at Papa Schimmelhorn, and added, "Well, I guess maybe not. Anyhow, tell me how it happened. Was it that Morva chick did it to ya?"

"*Ja! Ja!*" Papa Schimmelhorn replied. "It vas Lidtle Morva. All der time, Frau Laubenschneider vas right. She iss a vitch, und nodt a nice vitch — such a shame! — und now I am a frog und haff to help her make die baby frogs."

"Y' shoulda had me look her over," put in Gustav-Adolf. "I kin tell every time if they don't mean ya no good."

"Now it iss too late, Gustav-Adolf, but maybe if I promise to be nice, Frau Laubenschneider makes a shpell so I am me again." His croaking trembled with emotion. "You must hurry home und tell Mama, Gustov-Adolf! Right avay!"

"How?" asked Gustov-Adolf.

"V-vot? *Vot* did you say?"

"I said *how,* dummy! If I go to her and try to tell her, she'll just think I'm bitching about that goddamn cat box or give me some more liver. Get it?"

Papa Schimmelhorn got it. He realized abruptly that Gustav-Adolf had no way of communicating except by meowing, and that this time he himself had no way to scribble a note and tuck it under the flea collar so Mama would discover it. His answering croak was as close to a sepulchral groan as a frog's larynx can manage.

Gustav-Adolf peered at him closely. "You look lower'n a snake's belly button, chum. Hell, this ain't so bad. Y' got the pond pretty near to yourself except for all the other frogs — and there's all them eggs. Just play you're a — a what's it — a Nobel Prize winner, like you and the kid was talkin' about."

Gustav-Adolf was genuinely fond of Papa Schimmelhorn, but his underprivileged kittenhood aboard a Scandinavian merchant ship touching at such places as Port Said and even less reputable ports east of Suez had left him with a few rough edges.

"Anyway," he went on, "we got a lot to talk about, you and me, now you can get the drift of what I'm sayin'. You listen—"

Then, for an hour or more, he recited all his grievances, like how

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could a fine, self-respecting tomcat be expected to use a scruffy cat box? Wasn't there the whole outdoors, like Mrs. Flanagan's backyard vegetable garden down the street? And what was with this canned cat food business, just because they'd watched some pantywaist who'd never climbed a fence after a girl cat gobbling it on TV?

Papa Schimmelhorn did not argue with him. It may not have been much of a conversation, but at least it was keeping his mind from concentrating entirely on his own sorrows; and indeed, after Gustav-Adolf had gotten his pet gripes off his chest, they spent a couple of pleasant hours reminiscing, reminding each other of their escapades, amatory and otherwise. Finally, when Gustav-Adolf stretched himself and announced that it was time to go, Papa parted from him with a pang, and made him promise he'd return tomorrow.

So the long days and nights wore on, and though Gustav-Adolf, free to come and go, reminded Papa Schimmelhorn of his own captivity, still, the visits every two or three days became the high spots in his life. Besides, Gustav-Adolf did report the comings and goings around the house: how Little Anton had arrived and visited awhile with Mama, and gone on to some place called Europe, promising to return; and how he heard Mama say that *she* wasn't at all worried about her missing husband, and poohpooh the anxieties of Mrs. Laubenschneider and her other friends — after all, a bad pfennig always did turn up.

During the third week, the tadpoles began to hatch, and there were thousands of them. Morva Poldragon and Madame caught a few in a fishnet and gloated over them delightedly — never had they seen such enormous pollywogs; surely they would grow into frogs as large or even larger than their sire. Madame took to chuckling over him, and commenting on how impressive he would look inside her tank. Think how the customers from Yale would boast to all their academic friends! And there'd most certainly be articles, gloriously illustrated, in all the gourmet magazines.

"But is he not beginning to look tired, poor thing?" she'd say. "Do you not think perhaps he exerts himself too much?"

"Too much?" Morva would answer, with a heartless laugh. "Him? Why, he's a regular Nobel Prize winner, full of nourishing flies and bugs and beetles. And if he does wear out a little, so what? Pierre says the new crop is about 70 percent male."

"You mean then we can put him in the tank?"

"Why not? You're going to have plenty more."

Papa Schimmelhorn, hearing all this, was not alarmed — he knew nothing of the tank in the restaurant, and assumed that soon he would,

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metaphorically speaking, be put out to pasture as an advertising gimmick. In his degradation, any release from bondage to the obnoxious eggs seemed heaven-sent.

He had been on duty at *la grenouillière* for exactly three weeks, when, one bright morning, Morva Poldragon greeted him with a cheery "Hello, stud!" and, without warning, popped him into the frog carrier. "*Mein Herr* Frog-Schimmelhorn," she told him, "*are you going to have a nice surprise!*"

His heart leaped. Could it be? Was she really going to change him back into his proper shape?

He soon began to suspect that she was not. As they passed through the restaurant's capacious kitchen, she paused to point out Mme. Gargousse's little guillotine, to explain its purpose, and to introduce him to a chef, whom she addressed jokingly as Maître Robespierre, who operated it.

Maître Robespierre, fat and red, with a gross mustache, looked him over judiciously and remarked, "*Oui,* I think he will fit."

Moments later, Papa Schimmelhorn found himself swimming around in the great tank, surrounded by any number of other frogs, and deathly afraid of what was going to happen to him.

When the word first got out that Papa Schimmelhorn had vanished, Mama's close friends did their best to commiserate with her. The Hundhammers and the Luedesings were particularly attentive, asking her to dinner and taking her out to lunch, and suggesting that possibly, stricken by amnesia, he had wandered off and would eventually be located in some far-off city, and that, bowed down by their recent condemnation — which they now wholeheartedly regretted — he had simply fled away until things blew over. They tried to get her to report the matter to the police and to the FBI, or at least to place a "Come home, Papa. All is forgiven." ad in all the papers. Only Mrs. Laubenschneider, having a shrewd idea of what might have happened, kept her suspicions to herself to spare Mama's feelings.

As for Mama Schimmelhorn, she paid no attention to any of them. "It iss nonzense!" she declared. "I tell you vhere der old goat iss — chasing naked vomen, dot's vhere!" At this point she always stood, hefting her stiff black umbrella, her stiff black dress crackling, fearsome in her wrath. "Chust vait till he gets home. In die short ribs I giff der bumbershoot!"

Little Anton, when he dropped in on the way to Europe as he promised, was not quite so sanguine. Knowing his great-uncle very well indeed, he did not discount the possibility of Mama being right, but somehow he couldn't get the idea of Morva Pol-

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dragon being a witch off his mind. He confided his fears to Mrs. Laubenschneider, who assured him that they were by no means unfounded — that without a doubt, Papa Schimmelhorn had been ensorcelled; but just how, she did not know. When Little Anton asked her if she could cobble up some sort of counterspell, she sadly shook her head and told him that Ms. Morva's magic was much more powerful than her own, which really didn't go much beyond weaving hex signs into special flea collars.

"Well," Little Anton said, much concerned, "I don't suppose we really ought to take any abrupt action. Why don't we wait till I get back from Europe — it'll be only two weeks — and then, if he's still among the missing, I'll see to it that my company's every facility is set in motion. We'll find him if anybody can."

Mrs. Laubenschneider shook her head dismally. Maybe, she said, it would be too late — probably it already was too late.

Little Anton set off for Europe in a not-too-optimistic frame of mind, and returning a fortnight later, he found nothing to cheer him. Papa Schimmelhorn, of course, had not reappeared, and even if Mama was still absolutely certain that he would, her friends were not. They were at the house when Pêng-Plantagenet's Rolls-Royce drew up to the curb and, to the wonder of the urchins in the neighborhood, decanted him.

Mama gave him the bad news at the door, and ushered him into the parlor, with its two classic Chinese ancestral portraits of her and Papa, souvenirs to his excursion to an alternate universe where dragons and an imperial China flourished in perfect amity. The Hundhammers, looking decidedly funereal, were sitting on the carved Victorian sofa; the Luedesings, looking grimly resigned, occupied chairs underneath the portraits; Mrs. Laubenschneider hovered unhappily in the background, fingering what she hoped was a potent anti-hex charm bracelet.

Little Anton looked at them, and decided instantly that something must be done to raise morale. He took the chair Mama Schimmelhorn indicated, leaned forward with his finest smile, and said, "Really! You aren't keeping a stiff upper lip, now are you?"

Pastor Hundhammer shook his huge gray head for all of them.

"Well!" Little Anton beamed. "There's only one thing for it — you all need a bit of bucking up. It's already late, and I daresay you were planning to take my beloved great-aunt out to dinner? . . . I thought so. Well, I'll suggest something else. Why don't we have a drink or two here first, and then I'll take you all to the most expensive restaurant in town, courtesy of Pêng-Plantagenet? You know, that famous French place, *La Grenouille d'Or*. We can all go in the Rolls."

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Mrs. Laubenschneider, a little hysterically, started to protest that that was where the terrible witch—

Mama Schimmelhorn quelled her with a glance. "*Ach,* you are right, Lidtle Anton! I do nodt need der bucking up because I haff goot sense und for more than sixty years I know Papa, so I am nodt vorried. But for the rest of you, I go und get der schnapps for bucking up, und maybe Frieda—" She glanced at Mrs. Hundhammer. "—helps vith die canapés, und Lidtle Anton takes us for der goot frog dinner."

It was not for nothing that it had been said, and more than once, that Mama Schimmelhorn looked like a cross between Whistler's Mother and the Day of Judgment, and people seldom argued with her once her mind was made up. Now the prospect of dining at what had become New Haven's trendiest establishment, and of arriving in a chauffeured Rolls, cooperated to squelch any lingering protests; and Little Anton at once took charge of the conversation, telling them jokes and interesting anecdotes about what had happened to him in Paris or Oslo or Geneva, or Hong Kong or Singapore.

Presently, Mama returned bearing a tray with a bottle of good scotch for him, one of schnapps for herself and Herman Luedesing, and a decanter of modest port for the pastor and the ladies. Freida Hundhammer followed her with another tray of such goodies as pickled herring, smoked oysters, and a variety of cheeses. Presently the gloom began, if not to lift, at least to thin out considerably; and by the time they were ready to go to dinner, they all had mellowed, and Mama, who had been dipping into the schnapps, was decidedly tiddly.

Little Anton had taken time out to phone the restaurant, and had so impressed Madame with the name of Pêng-Plantagenet that she had her headwaiter standing outside to escort them. She herself met them at the door, practically curtsying, and assured them that they would have the finest table in the house, to say nothing of the most accomplished waiters, and — attributing Mrs. Laubenschneider's obvious nervousness to an American fear of eating frogs' legs, extolled their gastronomic virtues in terms that would have done credit to Brillat-Savarin.

Their table was located in a semiprivate alcove, and to reach it they had to pass by the enormous frog tank, which was well lighted so all its denizens could be clearly seen.

"*Was ist das?*" asked Madame Schimmelhorn.

Madame explained its purpose.

"Und vhy iss der great big frog making such chymnastics, chumping up und down in der vater?"

Madame replied that it was because he was a superfrog, one that she herself had bred just for her good customers, a very expensive frog, but worth — *ah, mon Dieu!* — every penny of it.

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She and the headwaiter seated them, Little Anton insisting that they have a cocktail or two before dinner. "Then," he said, "we can all go and pick our frogs. You will be happy to know that they are always humanely killed. See here—"

On the ornate menu, decorated with a great golden frog, there was a note in very small type explaining why Madame's husband, a humanitarian, had invented his small guillotine.

Mrs. Laubenschneider shuddered. So did Mrs. Hundhammer and Mrs. Luedesing. Pastor Hundhammer pretended to. Mama Schimmelhorn nodded approvingly, and said die French vere clefer people, who beliefed always in tradition.

Sipping their cocktails, they surveyed the other diners seated beyond their own exclusive alcove, and Heinrich Luedesing pointed out several professors, members of the Chamber of Commerce, and other luminaries.

Finally the headwaiter came to take their orders personally,

"Allow me!" said Little Anton. "As your host, and as I know a good bit about Madame's cuisine, with your permission I'll do the ordering. Do you mind?"

"Dot's O.K.," replied Mama Schimmelhorn, "but I choose mein own frog." She fixed the headwaiter with a steely eye. "It iss all right, *nicht wahr?*"

Oui, Madame! Mais certainement."

"Goot!" She rose. "Ve go now."

Accompanied by the headwaiter and by Little Anton, she strode across the floor, halted at the tank, and peered inside.

She smiled delightedly. "*Ja!*" she cried. "I take dot vun." She pointed at the huge frog she had noticed previously, who now seemed to be getting positively hysterical. "Such a fine vun! Und so *big*! If I cannodt eat all, I get a bowser bag. But first—" She paused, chuckling. "—maybe you bring him to me at der table, so I see him close und maybe feel him."

The headwaiter glanced quickly at Madame, who was nearby, and she gave him the go-ahead, indicating that any friend of Pêng-Plantagenet's was a friend of hers.

Mama Schimmelhorn, not too steadily, went back to her seat, and shortly the headwaiter returned, carrying the enormous frog, who was struggling and croaking rather horrendously. Mama regarded him with admiration.

"How beaudtiful!" she exclaimed. "Vith such plump legs!" She reached out. "I must hold him."

The headwaiter, a little dubiously, surrendered him, and she seized him ardently. "Only look at him!" she cried out. "Maybe if I kiss him—" She simpered coyly. "—he turns into a handsome prince!"

She raised him up. As he croaked even more agonizingly than before, she touched his forehead with her lips—

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Abruptly, there was a blinding explosion of white light, followed immediately by coruscating colors — and suddenly, in the restaurant, there was utter silence.

Everyone looked. Everyone stared openmouthed.

The frog was gone.

And there, in all his glory, stood Papa Schimmelhorn, stark naked.

There are times that try men's souls. Madame paled and gasped. The headwaiter started backing up, fumbling for a crucifix he had worn on a chain as a boy. Paster Hundhammer and his wife uttered pious exclamations. Mrs. Laubenschneider, hardly believing it herself, muttered that she'd told them so.

Only Mama was undismayed. She took one look at her husband there in front of her. Seizing her black umbrella, she advanced upon him.

"*Ha!*" her terrible voice rang out. "More monkey tricks! First dressed up like der frog! Und now you shtand there naked vith no clothes on! *For shame!*"

With one hand, she ripped the cloth from a nearby table, taking no heed of the shattering saltcellars and ashtrays. She flung it at him. "Cofer yourself up, dirty old man!"

Dutifully, Papa Schimmelhorn wrapped himself in the makeshift toga.

"Und now," she commanded, "tell die nice people you are sorry!"

Inexpressibly relieved to find himself back in his own form, and filled with gratitude to Mama for restoring him, he was only too anxious to oblige.

"*Croo-oak!*"

"*Vot?* I tell you, no more monkey tricks!"

"I — I am sorry," he mumbled, not quite coherently.

"Zo! Now ve go home." With one hand, she took him firmly by the ear while with the other she started applying the point of the umbrella to vulnerable parts of his anatomy. "*March!*"

Ignominiously, she walked him to the door, hiding him behind a nearby Cadillac until Little Anton had had a chance to pick up the pieces, gather his party, emerge, and summon up the Rolls. It took all his ingenuity and several minutes to placate Madame with Pêng-Plantagenet's hundred-dollar bills, to explain that Papa had been hired by a raunchy movie company to pull off a publicity stunt that had only too obviously misfired, and to hint that his genius at trickery was second not even to Houdini's. Madame was not convinced — she had quite clearly seen a frog vanish and a man appear — but she accepted the explanation with the money, and her customers, when she told them, were only too happy to accept it also. After all, it was a *natural* explanation, and so much easier to believe than what had actually occurred.

The Hundhammers and the Lue-

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desings, knowing that Papa Schimmelhorn was indeed a genius, were relieved to have their astonishment explained away so tidily; and Mrs. Laubenschneider, knowing better, wisely kept her own counsel.

They drove in total silence to the Schimmelhorn residence, where Mama, looking even more forbidding, chivied her defrogged husband up the stairs and through the door, making it clear that he and she had private business to transact. Then Little Anton took the rest of them off to an excellent Chinese restaurant where the mere mention of Pêng-Plantagenet brought them an absolutely superb dinner.

None of them — not even Papa Schimmelhorn — had noticed Morva Poldragon. She had arrived almost at the instant of his transformation and, when it happened, was standing just inside the door waiting for her escort, a pallid young associate professor of biology, to park his car; and he came in to find her leaning back against the wall, ashen pale and trembling.

"Hey," he said, "Morva, what's wrong?"

"Please take me home, Hamish dear," she said in a small almost unrecognizable voice. "I — I am unwell. *Please.*"

Had Morva's career — academically, socially, and in witchcraft — not been so uniformly successful, Papa Schimmelhorn's dramatically unexpected return to his human shape might not have shocked her as profoundly as it did. As her young professor rather sulkily drove her back to her apartment, she rebuffed his efforts to find out what had gone amiss and, at the door, coldly turned away when he tried to kiss her. Locking the door hastily behind her, she helped herself to a double cognac, sat down, drank it, stood up in agitation, then began to pace up and down. "How? How? *How?*" she cried aloud. "It was *impossible*! How could this happen to me?"

She realized that, where Madame was concerned, she had irretrievably upset her own applecart, and also that the gossip in New Haven — thanks to Mrs. Laubenschneider — would make her presence there uncomfortable at the very least. But all this did not trouble her half as much as the bare — very bare — fact of Papa Schimmelhorn's retranslation. Finally, after fifteen minutes of fretting, she phoned her grandmother and poured out her troubles.

"Start at the beginning," interrupted the old lady. "Take it calmly, step-by-step. What kind of a witch *are* you, anyway?"

Obediently, Morva went over the entire story, telling her grandmother everything she had not previously reported: the astounding accomplishments of Papa Schimmelhorn's subconscious scientific genius, his con-

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nection with the reputable — and immensely rich — firm of Pêng-Plantagenet, and finally the disgusting proposition he had made her. She related how she suddenly had realized that not only could she get rid of him, but also at one bold stroke solve Madame's frog problem and enhance her own reputation as a genetic engineer.

Occasionally her grandmother broke in with pointed questions, or simply chuckled evilly. When Morva described the plans for a Papa Schimmelhorn sperm bank, she laughed aloud — definitely a how-stupid-can-you-get laugh.

Then, the tale told, she said, in a voice so cold that Morva recoiled, "Morva, even when you were little, you never would pay attention to your lessons. Why did you ever think you could turn him *permanently* into a frog?"

"B-because I — because I knew that only those of us who are true witches, wizards, warlocks — only *we* can change our shapes and change back again. Why, everyone knows *that*. That's why in the old days, if someone killed or wounded a witch who'd changed into a wolf or something, they'd find her human body or, if she was still alive, the wound. Besides, that's why all the ordinary people we change into things — the ones who disappear — never show up again. You taught me that yourself."

"Indeed I did." The voice on the phone was by no means a pleasant one. "But I thought I also taught you that the Craft has more than one kind of practitioner. There are those who have to learn it the hard way — like all our ancestors, like you and me." She paused ominously. "But there are also, Morva *dear*, people who are born to it. Did you never suspect that all that stupid old man's inventions and discoveries might not have been due to his subconscious *scientific* genius? That subconsciously, without even suspecting it, he might be *one of us*? Well, now you know. You should have thought of it ahead of time. Certainly you should have realized it the minute his wife kissed him and changed him back. My goodness! She wasn't even a beautiful princess!"

Morva, sobbing a little, told her she was sorry, truly sorry, that she hoped she hadn't made any trouble for the Craft and its present members. She said she knew that she would be wise to leave New Haven, but was there anything else she ought to do?

"Yes," said her grandmother. "There is indeed. Don't you realize how dangerous that old man may be if he harbors a natural resentment — *especially* a subconscious resentment — against you for what you did to him, for that disgusting business of the frogs' eggs? You can't leave New Haven without making amends, without pacifying him somehow."

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B-b-but *how?*" quavered Morva.

"How? That's up to you. You know what he wants, don't you? Or anyway, what he wanted before you behaved so stupidly?"

"Y-yes," said Morva.

"Well, give him a few days to get used to being a man again, to simmer down a bit. That'll give you a chance to think it over and see how right your old grandmother is."

She hung up without another word, and Morva poured herself another potent cognac. She drank it facing the wall mirror, thinking sadly of how tired she looked and, yes, how beautiful. She remembered an indelicate compliment Papa Schimmelhorn had paid to her posterior.

Then, abruptly, her mind flashed her a picture of him there in the restaurant, clothed only in his beard, his muscles displayed like those of a heroic statue.

To her amazement, she realized that, despite his years, he really was a fine figure of a man.

Papa Schimmelhorn, meanwhile, cowered on a jump seat in the Rolls, looking in his tablecloth a little like a displaced Hindu holy man who had suffered from the crassness of the West. All the way home, the point of the umbrella prodded him unremittingly; and no one spoke to him — Little Anton because he judged it to be impolitic in Mama's present mood, the Luedesings and the Hundhammers because they still were so upset by what they'd seen, and Mrs. Laubenschneider because she realized that it would not be in good taste to gloat just then.

Finally the Rolls glided to a stop, and Little Anton opened the door for Mama. Again she seized her husband by the ear. "Now ve go in!" she hissed. "Und now I make you undershtand how vicked you haff been, chasing naked vomen und playing monkey tricks in der nice restaurant!" She pulled him out onto the sidewalk. "Lidtle Anton, maybe you vill take all mein goot friends oudt to dinner, und drife them home, und aftervard you can come back. In der guest room, der bed iss made."

Little Anton smiled suavely. "I shall return," he promised her.

She didn't wait to watch the Rolls depart. Muttering about what she was going to do and say, she chivied Papa up the steps, onto the stoop, and through the door.

Here it is more humane to leave them without describing the further humiliations he endured throughout the evening, for even Gustav-Adolf, coming in after Papa had been robed in a more seemly bathrobe and pajamas, looked at him disgustedly.

"What th' hell?" he asked in Cat. "How did *you* get back?"

But all Papa Schimmelhorn heard was, of course, "*Mrrr-ow.*"

Gustav-Adolf looked him over and meowed again, more eloquently.

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"Back to yer own stupid self," he said, "and lookin' even lower than when you was a frog. Damn all! Mebbe I shoulda et you while I had the chance!"

Then, tail high, he stalked from the room; and even he didn't cozy up to his old friend for two full days.

That night Papa Schimmelhorn found himself exiled to a cubbyhole that had once been a maid's room, and when, at around eleven o'clock, Little Anton thoughtfully brought him leavings from the Chinese restaurant, he was almost pitifully grateful. Long before, he had realized vaguely that he was terribly hungry; and during the course of his ordeal, he had, to his own distress and to Mama's intense annoyance, absentmindedly tried to scoop up a fly or two.

Little Anton gave him his belated supper, patted him consolingly on the shoulder, and tiptoed out, and presently Papa Schimmelhorn slept and dreamed confused dreams of frog ponds, eggs by the millions, the king of Sweden (who gives Nobel Prizes), and Morva Poldragon, who sat there and croaked at him.

During the next couple of days, except for a series of sharp lectures from his wife on how vicked he had been und how did he expect to go to hefen vhen he died?, he remained in Coventry. He was aware that the Luedesings, the Hundhammers, and Mrs. Laubenschneider all came a-calling, but only Little Anton sneaked in from time to time to cheer him up. Each evening, after Mama had provided him with an inadequate TV dinner, Little Anton took her out to a posh restaurant and did his best to soften her up a bit.

Finally, on the third day, she allowed her husband to return to his basement sanctuary, where at last Gustav-Adolf rejoined him; and, though he was still badly shaken by his experience and its aftermath, Papa began to feel that in due course, things might just possibly return to normal. But that afternoon, when Little Anton delicately broached the subject of the Nobel Prize winners and the projected sperm bank, he reacted violently.

"*Nefer!*" he cried out. "All by meinself? *Nein!* You do nodt undershtand! Lidtle Anton, vhile I vas a frog — you cannodt imachine! — all der time, by meinself, die eggs! *Ugh*! I giff back to Pêng-Panflageolet der money—" He strode over to the Stanley and retrieved the fifteen thousand. "Iss all here expect maybe fife thousand I giff to lidtle Morva."

"Don't worry about that, cherished Great-uncle," said Little Anton generously. "We can afford it. But tell me — did that girl *really* turn you into a frog?"

"You vill tell no vun?"

Little Anton promised.

So Papa Schimmelhorn gave him a blow-by-blow account of his frog pond experiences; and Little Anton,

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listening, saw that any plans for a profitable Schimmelhorn sperm bank would have to be shelved, at least for the immediate future.

He said as much. "But," he added, "it's too bad you want to keep the whole thing secret. It really is. Some of the tabloid's give you a mint of money for your memoirs, to say nothing of video rights."

That night he took Mama out to dinner once again, saw that she was partly mollified, and told her that the next day he would have to say goodbye and return to Hong Kong.

After his departure, having received a solemn promise that he would be good, she allowed Papa Schimmelhorn to eat with her upstairs; and the following afternoon, judging him to be adequately subdued, she informed him that she would be away for the long weekend, visiting with Mrs. Laubenschneider in Pennsylvania, and ordered him to remain safely in his basement. Chastely, he kissed her good-bye when the taxi called for her.

Filled with good resolutions, he vowed to keep constructively busy amid the loot and clutter of his cuckoo clocks and homemade power tools. "*Ja,* Gustav-Adolf," he declared, "I vill be goot. I vill invent something vunderful so Mama says how shmart I am. I act mein age und try nodt to think of predty pussycats."

"In a pig's eye!" rumbled Gustav-Adolf.

There was a sharp knocking at the garage door.

"Vell," Papa Schimmelhorn exclaimed, "iss Lidtle Anton back so soon already?"

He walked over and opened the door. It was not Little Anton. It was young Chauncey.

"Hi, Pop," he said, holding out a perfumed envelope. "I got a note for you." He winked lewdly. "It's from that weird chick you had the hots for."

"You should be ashamed, Chauncey," said Papa Schimmelhorn righteously. He noticed that his heart began to flutter as he took the envelope. "Here iss fife dollars. You do nodt tell anybody, *nein*?"

"Scout's honor," Chauncey promised.

Papa Schimmelhorn closed the door. He removed the sheet of ivory paper. He recognized the clear, bold hand.

Dear Mr. Schimmelhorn, (he read)

I have a terrible confession to make, and I must ask you to bear with me while I make it. I have been, and am being, sternly and painfully punished for what I did to you. The other witches in my coven, and even my dear grandmother, from whom I learned the Craft have shown me the error of my ways and the selfishness and heedlessness of my treatment of you. But everything they have said and

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done is as nothing compared to what my own conscience is putting me through.

Please, Mr. Schimmelhorn — please, Papa — the fact that I am trusting you with this confession, that I am trusting you to destroy it once you have read it, will bear witness to my sincerity. Please phone me and tell me that I shall have a chance to make amends.

Fondly,
Morva Poldragon

Papa Schimmelhorn read it once, and twice. Then he read it aloud to Gustav-Adolf. "I vunder—" he speculated, as memories of the frog pond began to fade before the other ideas invading his imagination.

"*Mrrrow*!" said Gustav-Adolf.

"Ha! Dot's it!" Papa Schimmelhorn slapped his mighty thigh delightedly. "Vhen I vas a frog, Gustav-Adolf, you told me alvays you could tell if somevun vas a friend oder an enemy. Now ve go up und phone lidtle Morva, und if she invites, then you must come vith. So I vill be safe."

They both went upstairs, and Morva answered the phone almost immediately. "Oh, Mr. Schimmelhorn — Papa — how very kind it is of you to call. I have been so—" She sobbed audibly. "—so dreadfully distressed. Please come to see me. If you can, please come this very evening. Perhaps at seven? We can have supper here, and then — and then—" Suddenly she sounded very coy, very demure. "—then I shall try to show you— Oh, I do hope you understand?"

He assured her that he did indeed. He vould be there at seven. Und did she like cats, because his Gustav-Adolf vould like to meet her.

Morva replied that she loved cats, and almost mentioned that her grandmother's familiar was a cat, but thought better of it.

Papa Schimmelhorn blew her a kiss over the phone. For an instant only, doubts assailed him. He shrug ged them off. *Maybe if I am lucky*, he thought happily, *Mama does nodt find oudt.* Then he took a shower, doused himself with a musky cologne, and — as he no longer had designer jeans — put on a pair of lurid tartan trousers, a bright Guatemalan shirt open almost to the navel, and a pair of tasseled brogans.

A few minutes before seven, he hoisted Gustav-Adolf to his shoulder and they walked over to Ms. Poldragon's. She opened the door dressed in the same silken sheath, emphasizing everything in which he had been interested, with a rope of pearls around her lovely neck and her long black hair garlanding her shoulders. She was not wearing her green glasses.

"I am *so* happy!" she whispered ardently, and put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

As she closed the door behind them, he was relieved to see that Gustav-Adolf, now on the floor, was

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rubbing against her legs and purring loudly.

"I think," she said into his ear, "that we shall both enjoy ourselves tonight."

She was not disappointed, for Papa Schimmelhorn, despite his years, was much more than just a fine figure of a man.

And he wasn't disappointed either. Among other things, her eyes *did* glow red in the dark.

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The fruits of victory are sweet, but in Felix Gotschalk's story, victory is truly "star-studded."

Ménage à Super-Trois

BY
FELIX C. GOTSCHALK

Mary Claire had adjusted the scale of the pnemoplastic panda from kitten-size back up to about three hundred simulated, roly-poly-pounds, and was coaxing it to jump up on the somnamb chaise, where I lay, supine, naked, and fish-belly vulnerable. Tiffany lay beside me, and she leaned over to kiss my umbilical invagination, and giggled a falsetto in her laryngeal transducer. In all my fifty calendrical tiers of life on Earth, I, Andrew Jackson Dalton, Brigadier General of the Armies (Retired), had never felt genuinely godlike until these two angels had been awarded to me after the victory I masterminded in the brief Germanic War of the year 2014. The West Germans had been actively planning for war since 1945 (like the Israelis, Teutonic tribes are historically warlike), and the United States had grown fat and indolent, then overly dependent on both foreign imports and foreign capital, and finally insolvent. The landlocked Germans wanted the geographic bedrock security of the U.S. continent, protected, as it was, on both coasts by great oceans, and since there were already millions of sympathetic Aryans here — "Jesu Christus!" Tiffany squealed, as Mary Claire mounted the panda and levitated up over us, riding the massive, cuddly beastie like a broncobuster. Tiffany rolled on top of me, in a marvelously mock gesture of protectiveness; then she fitted herself to me, and my command-level shaft grew up into her velvety biohuman folds. She activated her deep constrictors, and I felt sacrally welded to her.

"Libertine!" Mary Claire hissed playfully to Tiffany, her green eyes flashing, her perfect lips puckered

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and parted to reveal perfect teeth. She looked like Linda Evans as a young girl.

"All's fair," Tiffany laughed. burrowing her Stephanie Powers face in my neck, but Mary Claire lowered down on us, like the nude on the Warhol walrus, and settled the giant furry panda on Tiffany, ventral over dorsal, adjusting the graviton field so that the net weight of beast and rider served to deepen my penetration. It was an extra-phylum ménage à quatre of the most extraordinary sui generis sort, though the panda was along just for the ride, hah hah hah. *Young flesh* — all men my age want it, and those who can afford it will line up at the market to buy it by the pound. However, The Coolidge Effect can be dangerously sweet agony at my age, and I did not feel up to trying for a third orgasm that night.

Tiffany was making little raspberry-eructative noises with her mouth resting on my starboard neck, the panda was nuzzling me on the port side, and then Mary Claire bent down and fastened her perfect mouth on mine. With the greatest volitional effort, I bio-fed detumescence, and my staunchly heroic pillar of blood softened and retracted. Tiffany pouted in her own charming way, Mary Claire dematerialized the panda, and my two angels snuggled against me, like the unconditionally adoring pets they were. God, could any man, living or dead, be as happy as I? No, for I had fulfilled that most elusive of man's dreams: *polygamy with two optimally programmed females; interaction on demand with two perfect women.* I had fought the good fight in the 2014 war, though all I really did was scramble the telemetry of the German launch system with an EMP, the energy fusing every transistor in every silo; but it saved the good old U.S.A., restored its fiscal solvency, and I retired from military service as a brigadier, with a pension worth about $250K a year, not including perks and fringes and escalators.

Mary Claire and Tiffany were genetically engineered bio-human females (God, no words can describe their excellence), given to me by T. Bone Pickens III, who was the planet's first trillionaire, and whose business interests I saved. He put it this way: ". . . you saved all our asses, Andy, and you deserve the best. These here two supergals are the most expensive virgins on the planet, and I want you to have 'em boaf. . . ." And so I was living with two angels. I *owned* them.

Things had been going so well for so long that I had begun to take my omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence for granted. Everything I did reinforced my power, and, after all, power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. Mary Claire's and Tiffany's perfection could never have existed in mere humans: the flexible dimensions of their personalties and the bionic parameters of their physiologies were

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exquisitely programmed, so that, at a confidence level of .001 or so, I could expect them to speak and act with all but infallible appropriateness. And the control systems — the *power* — were all mine, for the girls were pair-bonded to me through pheromonal interfacing, activated by my double-helix DNA thumbprint pressure on their life-support bezels, which were beautifully cosmetized and set on the velvety expanses of their perfect abdomens. Once extruded by my print, it was like dialing the secret combination of a complex safe, and I could rheostat either or both girls into any one of ten different, metabolically cued behavioral regimens. Within themselves, the ten programs seemed infinitely responsive to my inputs, so that I could replicate (or invent at will) interactions of the most distinctive sorts. I had to be careful, though, because Mary Claire and Tiffany had kinetic implants that gave them great strength, and if I wanted to slap them around (which, surprisingly enough, had occurred to me), their bezels would have to be set at low centile QUIESCENT levels, never — *never* at, say, an ALPHA MANIC level. Because of my DNA coded access, I could never be cuckolded (how many men could boast of that?), but primogeniture rights were another matter, as I was about to find out.

"Well, *owl-shit*, Andy," T. Bone Pickens III bawled out at me, as he sprawled, intoxicated, in a fine chamois chaise. "I *gave* them gals to you. Cost me a bundle, too, Least you can do is let me fuck 'em." The ninety-seven-year-old Pickens had teleported to my Malibu condo all the way from St. Moritz, and had been popping frozen tequila and grapefruit juice pellets and stroking Tiffany's flanks. He was acting like the girls were his property. To be safe, I put both the girls on a centile 10 QUIESCENT setting. Tiffany was smiling, uneasily, like a child being petted by an ugly great-grandfather, and Mary Claire was standing beside me, like an obedient daughter. I wanted to get rid of Bone before he made any rash moves on the girls.

"Now Bone, you know the girls wouldn't go along with that. They're pair-bonded to me for life."

"Thissun here doan seem to mind gettin' her laigs felt up—"

"Are you my great-grandfather?" Tiffany asked, moving free of Bone's touch. There was a subtle stria of anger in her soft voice. Bone roared with drunken laughter.

"Is *that* what General Andy told you!" He cocked his melon face up at me and leered asymmetrically. He was wearing a twenty-inch waxed handlebar mustache and a 20X Beaver Stetson. "Yeah, gal, I'm your original Big Daddy. Come and sit on your daddy's lap."

"I must tell you, sir, that I find your familiarity offensive." Tiffany turned icy, and I winced. I didn't want to

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appear ungrateful to Bone, but then I hadn't seen him in two years, and he wasn't a personal friend. Of course he was my benefactor; a very powerful man, who had given me a priceless gift, but he was beginning to offend me now. Funny thing about personal offense at the hands of a celebrity — people are afraid to counter it. Sometimes it's fear and sometimes it's — shit, I don't know what it is. I put the girls on nonverbal.

"Hey, gal." Bone's voice grated deep in his laryngeal resonator. "You love your Great-Grand-Pappy, don't you? You come on over here." The girls were silent and still in the face of the aged magnate's confident order.

"Go to your chambers, girls," I said, in a moderate command-voice, and they left, like graceful robots. I irised the remote in my chairarm and keyed in light somnolence for both. Bone started to rise up out of the chaise, but then he made a clumsy gesture of dismissal, and sank back into the depths of the orthopedically responsive surfaces.

"You gettin' soft, Andy," he grumbled. "A general should ought to have better control over his troops." It was a funny thing to say after such a prompt display of obedience to my command, but I knew what he really meant.

"It's for your own well-being, Bone." I tried not to sound patronizing. "Those girls are strong as tigers. They might have injured you if you had made any big moves on them." This didn't seem to satisfy him.

"Are you tellin' me you can't control 'em?" God, but the man was acting casually proprietary, even baitingly proprietarian. He was starting to piss me off.

"I have total control over their interactions with *me*, because of the DNA interfacing. How they interact with strangers is another matter."

"Well, for the 25 million old United States dollars I gave for that pair of factory females, I sure don't feel like no stranger. And I never got to screw 'em, neither. I should have screwed 'em before I gave 'em to you. Broke 'em in right. You got to break women the way you break hosses."

"Hey, they're my property, Bone, remember? You gave them to me because I saved your trillionaire ass, as I remember you saying it." I was feeling protective of the girls and territorial about my condo.

"Now, don't go gettin' your hackles up, Andy. I ain't no Indian giver. I'm just used to having my way with young gals. I thought you and me and the two frisky fillies might have us a four-way orgy — you know, a real *kwottra may-nodge*. What say?" I was starting to shake my head, when the creaking old codger popped yet another tequila blatter, this time right into his corded carotid, and then he passed out, muttering, "Cheryl Tiegs and Christina Ferrare — I'll go get them instead—"

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A man of Pickens's stature does not travel alone, or so I would have thought, though with a teleporter, he probably would not be in any danger. His burnished silver Benz hung in the stasis field outside the visoport, and as I went to see if there was a pilot or a bodyguard in the craft, a basketball-sized *extremis* robot (we called them Flying ParaMeds) egressed from it and set an azimuth straight for Bone, apparently activated by his unconsciousness. Spidery extremities telescoped from its surfaces as the robot landed on Bone's chest, and, like fine calipers, the arms irised his tunic and ratcheted onto the rim of his life-systems bezel. His face was ashen, and it dawned on me that he might be in genuine *extremis*, in addition to being drunk. And then I thought, Hell, a man shouldn't die just seconds after being rejected by a beautiful woman. Morbid or not, a man ought to die in the arms of at least one beautiful woman; ideally, conduited into her, and, or course, orgasm as the "sweet death" was a supremely apt metaphor.

So I keyed the remote again, and summoned Mary Claire and Tiffany. I set their bezels at centile 80 HYPERVIGILANCE and EMPATHY, and told them to stay close to their great-granddaddy, and to do anything to comfort him while I located his executor. So, as the Flying ParaMed sphere shored up his vital signs, and the girls held his hands and whispered sweet assurances close in his ears, I got a hot-line computer flash over to Bone's world offices in the Dallas Dome, and within minutes a sophisticated hospital ship was in the field beside the Benz, and real-life ParaMeds and physicians were attending the stricken man.

The executor was there also — a short, bald, nondescript-looking man of forty or so, with a timid facial expression, and wearing a stock IBM dark blue suit, white shirt, and paisley cravat. Aside from his facial cast, he looked jurisprudential enough, and he was immediately taken with the girls, eyeing them almost hungrily, and paying only passing attention to the medical team and the victim. The team got Bone encased in an oxygen envelope, like a bug in amber, and floated him out and onto the ship. He looked waxen and gray and dead to me. The sphere was still affixed to his abdomen, and there was an intravene in his nose, and one in the carotid, where the tequila shooter had been just minutes before. The screen on the sphere was pulsing with patterns, but none of them had good Gaussian peaks, and I thought Bone must be at least clinically dead.

Everybody left but the executor, whose name was Winfield Blackwell, and he couldn't take his eyes off the girls, who were acting like the most demure geisha. With a great effort, Blackwell turned his attention to me, extracting a depositional audile cube

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from his thoracic niche. With a little flourish, he placed it on my favorite stressed lucoid coffee table, and the device glowed tiny bright pulses as he spoke. "We'll keep this informal, General Dalton, though it is merely a formality — um." He blushed, realizing he had made a self-canceling sentence, and looked at the girls as if their presence rendered him both inarticulate as well as blissful. "That is to say, I need a deposition, a brief account of what happened this afternoon. I do not feel it necessary to summon the provost robots."

"*Deposition* has a decidedly legalistic ring to it," I said, and the cube sparked in response to my voice, "but I have no objection."

"I just *love* barristers," Tiffany interrupted — inappropriately for her regimen, I thought, but then, she was less predictable than Mary Claire. She sat down on the chaise next to the executor, and gave him a look that might have turned any man into a pile of dumb, smiling jelly.

"Barristers are wonderfully authoritarian," Mary Claire chimed in, sitting close on his other side. "I do believe I love barristers best, and perhaps, stuntmen a distant second." This was an overly candid remark for her to make, for Mary Claire was usually reserved, within the parameters of her programs.

"Do you now?" the executor beamed. "It happens that *I* love, above all, beautiful young maidens. Wherever did you come by these delightful angels, General? Or have you set them on me for a purpose?" I suppose that attorneys have to deal with strategic distractions of all kinds, but I hadn't intended the girls as such, beyond my usual pleasure in watching them interact with strangers. Somehow they were acting overly operant, rather than responsive, but I decided not to change their settings.

"Mr. Pickens gave them to me, as it happens," I said, "in appreciation of my role in averting the Germanic Wars. And no, I did not set them on you. They are charmingly interactive on their own." The man looked hugely pleased.

"And what are your names, my dual enchantresses?" he asked, settling back on the chaise and putting a tentative arm around their shoulders. I hoped the high empathy settings would discourage the girls from resisting this mild intrusion of their life-space.

"I'm Tiffany Mitsu-Dalton, and this is my sister-surrogate, Mary Claire Mitsu-Dalton." Tiffany tossed her head in that special way she had. It was indescribable, and breathtaking to behold.

"*Mitsubishi,*" I put in. "Tiffany and Mary Claire were, ah, engineered at the Mitsubishi plant in Ann Arbor." Tiffany looked at the man and licked her lips. "Yes. I am told that that one plant alone saved the entire Michigan economy—"

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"The Illinois and Indiana economies as well," Mary Claire said brightly. "What those hordes of bowing little Nissan men spent on us was more than enough to turn the tide."

"Yes. We're the world's two most expensive Barbie dolls," Tiffany giggled. "And Andy here — Brigadier Andrew — is our very own Ken."

"The brigadier is a fortunate man indeed," Blackwell began, and then he looked very uncool and unable to continue. "Ah, General. Either I must forgo my duties, and yield to the power of these lovely girls, or—"

"We'll leave," Mary Claire said, and she and Tiffany got up, like sleek leopards in playful estrous postures. Sometimes I wondered if I really controlled them.

"But aren't we supposed to give depositions, too?" Tiffany was brushing her ecru-mesh shift with her hands, and Blackwell was slack-faced and gaping. The girls' pheromonal auras were strong, and I liked that, though it was contextually distracting. I liked high copulin counts in any context.

"Did either of you witness Mr. Pickens's attack?" the executor asked.

"No," Mary Claire answered him. "Andy sent us to our room just before it happened." He looked interested and a bit more serious.

"Were there, um, extenuating circumstances? Did either of you do anything to precipitate—"

"Quite the contary," I said emphatically. "I had the girls leave because the old man wanted to have sex with them. He had had several tequila shots and was becoming offensive. The girls would have resisted his advances, and might have injured him. I should tell you that Mary Claire and Tiffany have kinetic fulcrum implants that give them great physical strength."

"And Tiffany and I are pair-bonded to Andy," Mary Claire said, sounding proud and protective and sexy all at once. "We could never be intimate with anyone else." Now Blackwell looked at the girls more appraisingly, and turned crestfallen. I think he may have thought them to be secret hookers, and me maybe a rich closet pimp.

"Very well," he said, and his voice was a bit snobby and affected. "My next question is an important one: Did Mister Pickens touch either of you in an intimate manner?" The man's old-style wristwatch beeper emitted a 120-cycle sound, and he pressed the device close to his ear. After a few seconds he acknowledged the transmission, and shifted the depositional cube, as if he were stalling for time. Finally he said, "Mr. Pickens is dead, I am sorry to say." But he didn't seem sorry — he seemed relieved. "My question is therefore of the utmost importance: Was Mr. Pickens engaged in any degree of excitatory sexual foreplay immediately preceding his attack?" Mary Claire stooped to arrange some orchids in a vase,

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and Tiffany rubbed her flanks and tossed her head.

"He was stroking my thighs," she said.

"And did you, um, encourage him?"

"Heavens, no. The old man told me he was my great-grandfather, and I thought it proper to let him touch me, but then he got overly familiar, and I felt offended. That's when Andrew asked Mary Claire and me to leave the room." The executor suddenly deactivated the cube, like a chess judge hitting a timer.

"General, is this room equipped with, um, documentary video? Was Mr. Picken's, um, visit, *recorded*?"

"Affirmative to both questions. The video system is activated by a DNA field not interfacing with our domestic, ah, ménage."

"Which means everybody except the three of us," Tiffany said, touching the man's thigh with one beautifully manicured fingernail. "We're all on camera at this moment." She looked at one of the camera lenses and waved.

"May I watch the tape of Mr. Pickens's visit, at your convenience?"

"I don't see why not. Say, what's this all about?"

"I bet I know," Mary Claire said. "And so does Tiffany."

"Well, I'm just a retired old warhorse," I said. "Tell me the big secret."

Instead of coming to me, Mary Claire went to Blackwell, and whispered in his ear. Even in the mysterious context of the moment, the girls were acting like playful kittens, and the air was sparkling with their scents. Blackwell's nostrils flared in the richness of Mary Claire's close proximity, and then he smiled and nodded. Tiffany came to me in a panthery-graceful glide, sat on my lap, wreathed her perfect arms around my neck, and whispered in my ear. And I smiled and nodded. She looked into my eyes, and, God, my eyeballs rattled in their sockets. There were times when I felt Tiffany could induce a spontaneous orgasm in me with her eye contact alone. Then the four of us looked at each other in silence. I thought it proper for Blackwell to speak first.

"Your beautiful wards are correct, it seems," he began. "Mr. Pickens was a grand eccentric, and, among other things, he relished the company of young girls. His will specifies generous bequests to the female who happened to be with him *in extremis*. Contingent on my review of the tape, it appears that Miss Tiffany will be a beneficiary."

"That's just *marvy*," Tiffany piped. "I'm going to buy Andrew something just shamelessly expensive. Let me think. Mary Claire, does Andrew have any more of those Bergdorf boxers? You know, the ones with the brigadier star by the fly?" Blackwell smiled at me, a Cheshire smile, and I laughed, tolerantly.

"We'll have to look and see," Mary

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Claire said. "But maybe he'd like one of those new pneumoplast *femmes de voyage* — say, the fifteen-thousand-dollar model — Angie, I believe she is called, and made by Nakajima, no less."

"We're his $12 million models," Tiffany said. "He'd be disappointed with an inflatable woman." Blackwell's pupils were dilated, his face was flushed, and despite the fact that his role was ostensibly serious, or at least restrained, he seemed mesmerized by my two angels, and unconcerned over the death of his client. There was surely incongruity on all sides: the man responsible for my godlike stature in life had died in my house, and no one seemed to care. Then I realized that Blackwell was probably rejoicing over the oppressive old magnate's death, and that Mary Claire and Tiffany, being strangers to him, had no reason to grieve; indeed, Tiffany had good reason to rejoice. It was me, General Andy, who felt some sympathy for Bone, for he had been very old and full of life-support prostheses, and I was just beginning to feel the first subtle heraldings of the aging process. Fifty years of the earth's gravity, and all the cumulative, fuel-fed metabolizing and cell dividing within my body had made me aware of my mortality, even as my two angelic wards reinforced my polar feelings of immortality. And so I said something light, too.

"The stars on some of my shorts *are* threadbare, my lovelies, but an inflatable woman! That would be a gag gift of the first order."

"Seriously, for a moment." Tiffany surprised me yet again. "We may be confusing contiguity with causality here. Mr. Pickens may have been *feelin' my laigs up*, as he put it, and he may have been stricken thirty seconds later, but that doesn't make me responsible for his death. I do not wish to be on record as the agent of his demise."

"The tequila blatter he shot in his carotid was the obvious cause," I reassured her. "I'd take a bet that was the proximal cause. But, my dear, the will does seem to want to tag you as the distal cause."

The executor said, "Thankfully, we need not deal with the concept of legal culpability here, Miss Tiffany. Even as a barrister, I find affixation of blame an invidious subject, though I must deal with it all the time. Let me just tell you that if Mr. Pickens had been stricken at Hollywood and Vine at high noon, and a malodorous bag lady had tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him, she would have been the beneficiary, capricious as it may seem." He seemed pleased with his crude little example, and now a faint predatory look eased into his expression. "In any case, I should much prefer dealing with lovely ladies such as surround me now." He was building up to something, and the girls were hypervigilant. "And so, in my

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role as trustee of the several millions to be awarded in this case, I think it only fair that I be awarded some conjugal access to Miss—" I guess he was going to say "Tiffany," but instead he said something like "AARRGH!" and pitched forward onto the resilent shag mesh of the deck.

Tiffany must have been reading his mind, and I knew immediately what she had done to him: she had vectored in a stunbolt, a high-voltage, low-amperage shock, to his rib box; a true proximal cause of great thoracic pain, excruciatingly related to body position and respiration, and perfectly replicating the viral attack symptomatology known as "Devil's Grip." I guess I should have known the man would make his move sooner or later, and, while what Tiffany did to him might be disproportionate to the offense, it beat the hell out of her using her kinetic implant on him. What she had effected was a simulated attack of a viral condition known since the 1880s, and very appropriately titled. Who can know the wiles and the powers of a suprahuman female? I do and I don't.

"Why, whatever is the matter, Winfield, dear?" Mary Claire cooed to him, as he lay with his shiny bald head in her lap. She bent to whisper the same kinds of assurances in his ear that she had so recently whispered to his deceased client, while Tiffany put her perfect lips to his temple "to see if you're feverish," she said. Even in his pain he looked blissful, there in the arms of the girls. But Tiffany wasn't finished. She loosened his cravat, defluxed the vertical velour facing of his tunic (rather un-IBM-like, I thought), and gently parted it, exposing his life-systems bezel. *And as she did so, her movements were those of a lover, not a ministering angel of mercy.* She lowered her face to examine the bezel, and her movements were stunningly like those of a lover hovering to kiss the navel as a prelude to kissing the genitals.

"Does your bezel take standard diagnostic templates?" she asked him in a soft voice, and she might just as well have been asking him if his piston would fit in her cylinder. He nodded, smiled, and closed his eyes, as Mary Claire stroked the sides of his face. I knew Tiffany's plan (or thought I did), so I got the first-aid cassette from the console, extracted a Blue Cross energic-diagnostic template, and handed it to her. She gave me a beautifully knowing look. She fitted the template, lovingly, down into the combinatory serrates in the face of the bezel, and keyed in the probes. In just thirty seconds the tiny tape extruded, and she removed it and handed it to me. I put it in the viewer, and it read:

VIRAL NEURALGIA/DEVIL'S GRIP (ARCHAIC)
BLUE CROSS CODE 338 41 104110
TREATMENT: 120 MG DARVOCET/GENERIC
BED REST/SEXUAL ABSTINENCE

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Tiffany touched the painkiller pellet to Blackwell's lips, like a courtesan feeding an emperor a grape, and Mary Claire had him take it with a thimbleful of cognac. "When I die," he whispered to them, "I want it to be like this." I sent him home in the Benz. I had never seen a man in pain happier.

The inquest on T. Bone Pickens III was routine, and we did not have to attend. The cause of death was given as massive cardiac arrest, secondary alcoholic anoxia, and tertiary testosteronic surge. Tiffany was awarded $112.8 million new United States dollar-credits, and said that Mary Claire and I could have as much of it as we wanted. By God, generosity may be the finest trait for a woman to have! And, true to her word, Tiffany bought me four dozen pairs of shamelessly expensive Bergdorf boxers, each set emblazoned with the single silver star of my rank.

Instead of the gag-gift inflatable woman, Mary Claire presented me with four dozen matching Bergdorf T-shirts, each emblazoned with a holographic image of my face, flanked by images of herself and Tiffany, and, underneath, the entablature: *MÉNAGE À* SUPER-TROIS. Then they wanted me to strip on the spot and model the new underwear for them. Tiffany pinched me on the dextral gluteus as I was standing on one leg, stepping into the sinistral side of the one-star, command-level boxers. I must remember to triple-check her programming one day. It often suggests a damnably unnatural spontaneity, no less fresh and charming, but lacking in deference to my rank. Then I thought, Jesus Christ at The War College, if she could induce a testosteronic surge in a ninety-seven-year-old man, she must be able to overide her programming.

Everything I do reinforces my godlike powers. And, since I am God, I think I will adjust my angels' pheromonal clouds. to, say, centile 95, and fly with them over to Catalina for the weekend. Heaven can wait. Hey, they're dancing around me and singing. ". . . He is the Very Model of a Modern Briggy General. . . ." God, I love bio-human females.

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Installment 23: *In Which Premonitions of the Future Lie in Wait to Swallow Shadows of the Past*

I'm at 30,000 feet aboard United flight 104, on my way to speak at a seminar on the creation of the universe (about which, you may be certain, I know even less than you) in company with Sir Fred Hoyle and Robert Jastrow at the University of Rochester; and as fear of making a total buffoon of myself has rendered me *tabula rasa* on the subject, precluding preparation of salient remarks, my mind is ratlike scurrying toward anything *but* the creation of the universe, so whatthehell, why don't I write this overdue column instead; and most of all I'm thinking, mostly, about my friend Walter Koenig who is not speaking to me at the moment.

My friend Walter is a writer of screenplays, a fine teacher of acting, a collector of Big Little Books, and an actor who, for twenty years, has assayed the role of Ensign (now Lt.-Commander) Chekov on a television series, and in a quartet of motion pictures, generically known as *Star Trek*. A series and films with which many of you may be familiar. (I say *may be familiar* because, of late, things have gotten even worse than I'd imagined them to be, cultural memorywise. I mentioned all-chocolate Necco Wafers to a bunch of people in their early twenties the other day, and they looked at me blankly. That, added to

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the fact that on my *Hour 25* radio show, during an interview with the talented artist Phil Foglio, he admitted he'd *heard* the phrase "civil rights" but didn't really know what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 alluded to, has given me pause. Thus have the Sixties and their history been flensed from the world in the minds of those under forty. So I take *nothing* for granted any more.)

Now Walter being pissed at me may not, at first blush, seem to be fit fodder for philippic, but the *reason* he's pissed at me, the shadowy philosophical subtext of our minor contretemps, ties in with a few random thoughts about the new film STAR TREK IV: *The Voyage Home* (Paramount), which Walter arranged for me to see a few weeks ago, as I fly overhead writing this.

A momentary pause. A short while ago I promised you a long column analyzing and praising the films that David Cronenberg has directed. I'm working on it. Mr. Cronenberg has made available to me cassettes of his earliest, most-difficult-to-locate films (*Stereo*, made when he was 26 years old; *Crimes of the Future* from 1970; *The Parasite Murders* — which you may know either as *Shivers* or *They Came From Within* — and the uncut version of *The Brood*), and I am going at this essay with care and measured reason. It will be along shortly. Last time I ventured some thoughts on the coloring of films. Since that column — which has caused some small stir in the film community, including a spirited essay of response even *before* my column saw print, from screenwriter/director Nicholas Meyer, in the L.A. *Times* — I have learned of even more horrifying technology about to be brought to bear on classic films now in the clutches of Ted Turner, and I am amassing data on same with director Joe Dante, in preparation for a follow-up column. That one should blow your socks off, and I expect if all goes well it will be my next installment. I haven't lost my place, as you might have suspicioned: I am simply trying to develop a sense of punctiliousness in my declining years. I tell you this to forestall *kvetching*.

So Walter isn't speaking to me.

That isn't unusual. Since the evening in 1963 when I met Walter on the Universal Studios backlot "New York street" where the *Alfred Hitchcock Hour* was filming my "Memo from Purgatory" teleplay, he has sent me to Coventry many times, occasionally even for just cause. I am not permitted to get angry with Walter, that isn't in the contract; so I am not pissed at Walter; but since I don't deserve his animus this time, I have decided to wait until he apologizes for being such a poop. Nonetheless, the circumstances by which this crankiness developed, and the subtext which is more than slightly intriguing, prove germane to a theory about *Star Trek*

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that I've worked out exhaustively since I first thought of it way back, oh an hour ago, will this flight *never* end?!?

Presumably because I asked for $500,000 to write the screenplay of *Star Trek IV* when I met with Leonard Nimoy and Harve Bennett on Friday, January 25th, 1985 — on the grounds that if I had to write for Shatner, if I had to write in a part for Eddie Murphy, if I would have to face the imbroglio of others wanting to share screen credit with me, if I was going to have to put up with the *tsuriss* I knew would be attendant on *any* involvement with Paramount and its peculiar attitude toward the *Star Trek* films, I would have to be compensated in heavy balance — a demand that was greeted first with disbelief, then consternation, then with disdain, and finally with utter rejection (as sane a decision as ever Paramount made), I was never invited to a pre-release screening of the movie.

I mentioned having been "overlooked" during a conversation with Walter, and he thereafter broke his hump getting me comped into the Cinerama Dome. Not an easy thing to do.

A day or so later, when I called Walter to thank him for his efforts, I made some casual remarks about my reaction to the film — which were positive — not foamingly laudatory, but positive, about which more in a moment — but the main reason I'd called was to urge him to get into the queue for script assignments on the newly-proposed return of *Star Trek* as a television series for syndication, with an all-new cast. We talked about that for a few minutes and then, with an edge in his voice, Walter said, "Okay, so what did you think of my performance?"

For an instant I was thrown off-balance. The subject had been changed without warning. And I answered quickly, with what I consider honesty and candor, "It was fine. I said I thought it was the best ensemble work from the regulars that I'd seen in any of the four films, remember? They didn't give you quite as much to do in this one as they did in *Star Trek II*, but it was a lot more onscreen time than you got in the first or third films. And what you did, I liked. You know. You did Chekov, and you did him just fine."

Walter's anger was instant. "Don't break your back straining yourself!" I fumfuh'ed, not understanding why he was so hot, and only made matters worse (apparently) by saying, "Come on, Walter, I'm not bullshitting you. It was fine. I mean, they don't really give you Gielgud or Olivier material to play . . . what you were given you did very well, indeed." Which only raised his ire the more. And he snapped my head off that he was through discussing it, and I said we can talk about it more later, if you like, and Walter snarled, "Yeah, sure,"

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or bit-off words to that effect, and he hung up on me; and we haven't talked since, which is a while ago; and I don't like having Walter pissed at me, but there's not much I can do about it this time till he cools down and chooses to honor my honestly-delivered remarks.

Which would be, taken at face value, merely the recounting of an unfortunate misunderstanding between long-time chums, were it not that (upon reflection born of gloom) what I said to Walter emerges from a response to the totality of the *Star Trek* phenomenon. Which is, at last, the proper fodder for this column.

It is no secret that for many years I was not exactly the biggest booster of ST. Having been in at the beginning *before* the beginning of the series, having been one of the first writers hired to write the show, I was wildly enthusiastic about the series as Gene Roddenberry had initially conceived it. (In fact, at the very first Nebula Awards banquet of the Science Fiction Writers of America, which I set up at the Tail O' The Cock here in Los Angeles, I arranged for a pre-debut screening of the pilot segment.) The show debuted on September 8th, 1966 and by December it was in trouble with NBC. The Nielsens were very low, and Gene asked me if there was anything I could do to get the popularity the show was experiencing in science fiction circles conveyed to the network. I set up "The Committee" and using the facilities of Desilu Studios, I sent out five thousand letters of appeal to fandom, urging the viewers to inundate NBC with demands that the show be kept on the air. (The original of that letter, seen here for the first time in print, is reproduced as a sidebar courtesy of The Noble Ferman Editors.)

And so it was with heavy heart that I fell away, as it were. I had my thorny problems with Gene over "The City on the Edge of Forever," about which I've written elsewhere; and after my segment aired I divorced myself from ST with a passion that frequently slopped over into meanspiritedness. When the first film came out in 1979, I wrote a long and bruising review that resulted in fannish animus up to and well past the egging of my home. This, despite the fact that by now everyone agrees *Star Trek — The Motion Picture* was a dismal piece of business.

I was not much more impressed with ST as the subject for full-length features when STII was released in 1982, chiefly because Paramount thought it could amortize some of the sets and recoup their losses on the first flick. Or if not losses, at least make a few bucks on the residue.

The Search for Spock in 1984 seemed to me a decent piece of work, and I said so in print. But by that time ST had already been an animated cartoon series, and the original shows were a vast moneymaking machine

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for Paramount in syndication. Not to mention videocassettes, which sold steadily and well.

Now comes the fourth feature-length outing of the crew of the NCC 1701, and it is far and away the best

THE COMMITTEE

Poul Anderson • Robert Bloch • Lester del Rey • Harlan Ellison
Philip José Farmer • Frank Herbert • Richard Matheson • Theodore Sturgeon
A. E. Van Vogt

Dear _____

It's finally happened. You've been in the know for a long time, you've known the worth of mature science fiction, and you've squirmed at the adolescent manner with which it has generally been presented on television. Now, finally, we've lucked-out, we've gotten a show on prime time that is attempting to do the missionary job for the field of speculative fiction. The show is STAR TREK, of course, and its aims have been lofty. STAR TREK has been carrying the good word out to the boondocks. Those who have seen the show know it is frequently written by authentic science fiction writers, it is made with enormous difficulty and with considerable pride. If you were at the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland you know it received standing ovations and was awarded a special citation by the Convention. STAR TREK has finally showed the mass audience that science fiction need not be situation comedy in space suits. The reason for this letter -- and frankly, its appeal for help -- is that we've learned this show, despite its healthy growth, could face trouble soon. The Nielsen Roulette game is being played. They say, "If mature science fiction is so hot, howzacome that kiddie space show on the other network is doing so much better?" There is no sense explaining it's the second year for the competition and the first year for STAR TREK; all they understand are the decimal places. And the sound of voices raised. Which is where you come in.

STAR TREK's cancellation or a change to a less adult format would be tragic, seeming to demonstrate that real science fiction cannot attract a mass audience.

We need letters! Yours and ours, plus every science fiction fan and TV viewer we can reach through our publications and personal contacts. Important: Not form letters, not using our phrases here; They should be the fan's own words and honest attitudes. They should go to: (a) local television stations which carry STAR TREK; (b) to sponsors who advertise on STAR TREK; (c) local and syndicated television columnists; and (d) TV GUIDE and other television magazines.

The situation is critical; it has to happen now or it will be too late. We're giving it all our efforts; we hope we can count on yours.

Sincerely,

Harlan Ellison

Harlan Ellison
for The Committee

December 1, 1966

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of the bunch, a film that capitalizes on what the series did best when it was at the peak of its limited form. It is a film about the crew, who have become family for millions of people around the world, and it is filled with humanity, with caring, and with simple, uncomplicated elements of decency and responsibility. It eschews almost all of the jiggery-pokery of abstruse theology, gimcrack hardware, imbecile space battles and embarassingly sophomoric "message" philosophy to present an uncomplicated story of the clock ticking down to doom while decent people struggle to find a timely and humane solution.

While I have my Writers Guild of America member reservations about the propriety of a solo credit that reads A LEONARD NIMOY FILM for the man's second directorial outing, and while I still see the hideous thumbprint of Bill Shatner's demand for more and more domination of scene after scene, I recommend this film to those few of you who may have missed it. It is a *good* movie, and the best presentation yet of all of the regular cast members — except for Nichelle and George, who caught the short end of the script this time — and is, at last, a ST venture at full length that no one who loves movies can carp about.

But as the film does well in theaters, and as the new series is prepared for nationwide syndication, as the fast-food joints market their ST glasses and the K-Marts hawk their ST lunch boxes, we must recognize that a miracle has been passed.

Star Trek has, at last, become more than an underground fetish; it has surpassed the mingy goal of networks and studios for a five-season run; it has gone beyond an addiction that needs a filmic fix every two or three years; it is larger than just a tv/movie staple, like the boring James Bond things that come to us as regularly as summer colds. It has absorbed its own legend and hewn a niche in posterity against all odds.

The series had serious flaws, taken as a whole. The studio and the network were never comfortable with it, and did little to preserve it. The first two films were, at best, cannon fodder. Its greatest strength, the seven or eight fine actors who comprise the crew of the *Enterprise* — with the exceptions, of course, of Shatner and Nimoy — have been used badly and treated on too many occasions as spear-carriers for name guest actors or special effects trickery. The pandering to trekkies, trekists, trekkers and trekoids has been shameless, to the detriment of chance-taking and plots that ventured farther afield.

Despite all that, *Star Trek* has held on. It has clawed its way out of the genre category to become a universal part of the American cultural scene. And *Star Trek IV* (about whose plot I need say nothing for you have either seen it and know it, or haven't seen it

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and don't need me to spoil it) is the first light on St's road into the future. *Star Trek* is now a given. It has swallowed the inadequacies of its past, and now can do no wrong. The new series, and however many full-length films there may be, are now assured of an unstinting affection usually reserved for Lindberghs or Rutans&Yeagers. It is a seamless whole, a household word, the speaking of whose title conjures memories and an all-encompassing warmth for several generations who have grown up with these space adventurers. Like Tarzan and Robin Hood and Sherlock Holmes, like Mickey Mouse and Superman and Hamlet, they are forever. Or as close to forever as a nation rushing toward total illiteracy can proffer.

Thus, when Walter asked me how he had performed in this latest icon of the legend, my response was as *de facto* as that of the ballerina in *The Red Shoes* who, when asked by the impressario, "Why must you dance?" replied almost without thinking, "Why must you breathe?"

I am guilty of forgetting that Walter is, among his many other personas, an actor. And actors need to hear if they did the acting well or badly. I am guilty of thinking (for the first time, and without recognizing the shift in my own perceptions) of Chekov as part of a gestalt, and a gestalt that worked so wonderfully well for me, for the first time, that I overlooked Walter's need as a human being to be singled out.

I am guilty of consigning Walter Koenig to the seamless oneness of the *Star Trek* mythos. If a brick had asked me how well it had performed as a brick, I would have said, "Your wall holds up the roof splendidly." That is at once ennobling him and demeaning him. But until I said it, and until I worried the repercussions of having said it, I did not understand that the miracle had been passed, and that *Star Trek* had become something about which ordinary criticism could not be ventured, at risk of being beside-the-point or redundant.

Like the politician whose nobility in high office blots out all the picayune malfeasances on the way to investiture as icon, ST has eaten its past and has lit its way into the annals of Art that is beyond Entertainment.

That I find myself saying all this, after more than twenty years, surprises me as much as you.

Now if Koenig will just lighten up, perhaps I can concentrate on the creation of the universe, and other less knotty problems, such as *when the hell will this damned jet land!?!*

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Paul Lake is a poet who has appeared widely in such magazines as The New Republic *and the* Partisan Review, *in addition to teaching at Arkansas Tech University. He writes that "Rat Boy" is his first attempt at writing speculative fiction. It is a grisly little masterpiece of the macabre that will have you avoiding mirrors like the plague.*

Rat Boy

BY
PAUL LAKE

It began after Robert arrived in Mr. Wilkerson's fifth grade class in Deerfield Elementary during the third week of fall term back in Pennsylvania.

Robert. Not Bob or Bobby like any normal fifth grader. That's the one thing he made clear right away. And he *looked* like a Robert, too — about three inches taller than any of the other boys and at least thirty pounds heavier, which in the fifth grade is about the same as the difference between a featherweight and a light heavyweight in boxing. He always wore horizontally striped shirts, which made him look even chubbier, and his hair looked like it hadn't seen a brush since the day he was born.

For the first two weeks after his late arrival, he hardly spoke, except for an occasional sarcasm, like "So what?" or "Yeah, that's what you think," uttered with an insolent curl of the lip and a sidelong glance calculated to check whoever had made the offending remark. Not clever sarcasms, but, backed by his contemptuous sneer, they were intimidating to fifth graders who supposed they displayed a worldliness beyond the rest of us. We were all quietly impressed. People always are by contempt.

Robert spent those first two weeks sizing the situation up before he decided on the right course to pursue — and as soon as he'd gathered enough intelligence, he made his move.

Our desks were arranged in little rectangles of six desks, three on each side facing each other. As fate would have it — or by Robert's mysterious design — he wound up sitting directly across from Barbara June, a tall girl from somewhere in the South who

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stood a head taller than anybody else in class. Barbara June wore horn-rimmed glasses and looked the part of a straight A student — very shy and quiet, though on the playground she could outrun any of us, boys included. And when she had a mind to, she could play softball with the boys and more than hold her own. Her quietness and shyness made her seem older than the rest of us, an impression strengthened by her height and her seriousness. I suppose that's why Robert decided to make his own impression by starting on her.

He looked up from under his greasy bangs at her one day during handwriting exercises and said loudly enough for everyone to hear, "Hey, beanpole, how'd ya like a coconut-butt?"

She answered innocently, "What's that?" not sure what to expect.

"You'll find out soon enough," he chuckled, then bent back to his scrawl, smiling to himself.

Wilkerson was out of the room. As usual. He'd often leave for forty-five minutes at a stretch without telling the class where he was going, and as long as he didn't make us do any work, we weren't going to ask any questions. I don't know if he sat in the john smoking cigarettes or, what was more likely, went down the hall to talk to some of the women teachers who were always leaning in their doorways. Wilkerson was tall and single and not bad-looking — and young, I guess — kids never can tell at that age. And since there were only about two male teachers in the whole school, I guess he was considered a kind of exotic rarity by the younger women. I suspect it was the latter because we'd often see him leaning in the doorways of the women teachers between classes, looking down at them and smiling while they flirted up at him. Either way, a certain decorum prevailed in our classroom during his absences; no one talked or caused any kind of commotion. We wanted to keep things just the way they were.

Wilkerson had been gone about a half hour when Robert stood up from his desk, pencil in hand, and walked to the pencil sharpener. On his way back, he detoured so that he passed behind Barbara June's desk. She was still bent over her neatly penned paper, when the room grew silent and Robert stood directly behind her. Hearing the silence, she sat straight up in her chair. Then, without a word of warning, Robert pitched forward, cracking his head into the back of her skull, hitting his own head at the point just above his forehead where the skull is hardest and least vulnerable, like the point of a hard-boiled egg, and cracking her soundly on the softer, rounder part of the skull at the back of the head. When their heads hit, it sounded like a melon being thumped by a log. A split second later, Barbara's eyes went crossed and

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rolled back inside her head, then her head fell forward onto her desktop.

She was out for about ten seconds before her eyes opened, still crossed like a comic drunk's. By that time, Robert was back in his chair, smiling directly at her while the whole class sat in stunned silence. Literally, I don't think she ever even knew what hit her. She rubbed the back of her head with one hand, and her face flushed with embarrassment and anger, though I don't think she really knew what had happened. But Robert's malicious smiling at her must have given her a pretty good idea.

She started to say something two or three times, but finally just rubbed her head with one hand and asked, "What happened?" When Robert burst out laughing, something happened to the rest of us and we burst out laughing, too — mostly at the sheer outrageousness of a boy knocking a girl out with his own head in the middle of class. Most of the other boys thought that was about the cleverest and most daring thing they'd ever seen, and went out of their way to show Robert their friendship and admiration from then on. And having successfully established his own undisputed superiority as he'd planned, Robert was only too glad to accept. The little bastard.

It wasn't long after that when he noticed me. It must have been my shyness or the fact that I wore glasses then or a combination of both, but before long, he began to single me out for his special attentions.

"Hey, Four Eyes," he asked one day when Wilkerson was out of the room and we were all standing in line — fifteen minutes early — to go to lunch, "what's that on the ceiling?"

When I looked up to where he was pointing, he hit me in the Adam's apple with a sudden karate chop that cut off my wind. The front of my throat, for two terrifying seconds, felt as if it had been welded to the back, and my stomach lurched during the brief interval like a small boat caught between waves.

Even if I had had the presence of mind to — and had been able to breathe — I probably wouldn't have tried to hit the monster back. Two days earlier I'd seen him pick up one of the more intrepid boys by the armpits and run him crashing into a wall ten feet away. Robert's belly smacked into the smaller boy's belly and sandwiched him flat against the wall. When Robert backed away, he released the boy and let him collapse breathless to the floor. "You ought to be more careful where you're going," he cracked to the semicircle of boys that had come to watch. "You could get hurt like that." That old line worked its charm, and they all laughed right on cue, though a little nervously as the boy took a long time to get to his feet.

Me, Robert took a special disliking to.

Take recess, for instance. On the

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softball field during our hour or so on the playground each day, Robert was invariably one of the two team captains. The other team captain would be whoever was Robert's current lieutenant off the ball field that week, and somehow always possessed a sixth sense for whom to pick and whom not to pick in order to please the little martinet. Though I was a better than average ballplayer, they took a sadistic delight in arranging for me to always be the last one chosen for either team, holding back grins as they pretended to choose between me and the odd assortment of runts and incompetents and sissys at the bottom of the athletic pecking order. My humiliation as I stood there day after day on the sidelines in the hot sun waiting to hear my name — the screams of the girls echoing across the dusty playground to where we huddled in opposing camps — well, it was indescribable.

Inevitably, since we played on opposite teams, something would happen to give Robert the excuse to pin me down in the dirt and torment me. If he were playing second base and I hit a double, I could slide safely into second base by seven feet and he'd call, "Out!" in a loud, brassy voice that brooked no argument. When I disputed the call, he'd sneer, "Are you calling me a liar, Four Eyes?" and knock me down before I could answer. Then he'd sit on my chest with my arms pinned down flat by his fat knees and say, "Because if you're calling me a liar, Four Eyes, I hate to think of what I might do to you." Every few seconds throughout the following interrogation, he'd bounce his fat buttocks on my stomach for emphasis, knocking the wind out of me and making my ribs feel as if they were about to splinter.

Then, when he'd worked himself into a demonic rage, he'd press his hate-purpled face within six inches of mine and hiss, "You know what I'd really like to do to you, Four Eyes? You know what I'd *really* like to do? I'd like to jump up and down on your face. Right on your face." And then, with horrible emphasis and spraying spittle in my face in his fury, he'd add, "With spikes on my shoes. With *spikes* on."

He'd be possessed when he said that kind of stuff. I'd have to lie there out of breath and aching and wait for his fury to spend itself before he'd let me up. None of the other boys dared to intervene. They all must have thought, There but for the grace of God. All they had to do was to think of poor Jerry Kennedy, who had made the mistake of telling his parents or Wilkerson or somebody about something Robert had done to him, because one day during recess on a day when Robert had had to go to the principal's office, Robert sneaked up behind Jerry Kennedy and got him in a choke hold. That's the kind of thing Robert specialized in, the really terri-

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fying stuff. Robert held Jerry gasping and thrashing helplessly in that choke hold till he blacked out, and then let him fall.

When Jerry came to, Robert looked down at him and said very menacingly, "Don't ever tell on me again, shrimp, or next time I won't let go."

That was the last time anybody squealed on *him*.

That's just to set the scene, just to give you an idea of what I was living with then at school. At home I tried to keep Robert and the whole miserable situation out of my mind. But one day when I was standing in front of the mirror making faces, I made the connection.

I'd always had a feeling of fascinated horror with mirrors — ever since I'd heard the story of Pinocchio or seen the Disney film when I was little. Things affect you more deeply when you're a kid. You've got no filter to screen out the things your imagination cooks up. You know the part of *Pinocchio* where he started turning into a donkey? Well, every so often I'd dream that I was standing in front of a mirror, and the first thing I knew my ears had turned into donkey ears, and I knew that it was just a matter of time before I'd completely turn into a donkey. The horror of that nightmare was overpowering. I'd wake up shaking and sweaty with my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest. And I was so afraid that I'd actually begun to change that I was afraid to turn on the light and look in the mirror to see that it wasn't true.

So you'd think I'd be too afraid to go near a mirror, right?

Just the opposite. I'd lock myself in the bathroom sometimes for more than an hour making faces at myself. I guess all kids do. It's seeing all of the other people locked away inside us that we can make appear just by twisting our faces into the right expressions that fascinates us, I suppose. All of the people it's best to *keep* locked away inside us.

I gave all of my favorite faces names. There was the Neanderthal, which I made by projecting my jaw and grimacing while I slouched my eyebrows and my whole forehead regressed into a beetled slope. I'd turn my head slowly back and forth in a kind of grotesque orbit so I could see the stupid sloped face from every possible angle until my face grew tired or I got bored with it. And it *did* look like a Neanderthal. Kind of a good argument in favor of evolution, I used to think.

But the best face was the one I called Rat Boy. Christ, it was horrible. I'd suck in my chin as far as it would go and project the big front teeth that were too large for my head outward, just like a rat's. This was before I wore braces. And I'd squint my eyes so they slanted together, projecting my cheekbones and sucking in my

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cheeks so the front part of my face looked like a muzzle. But the best part was the eyes that would leer back at me from the mirror. Because when I really got into character, I could feel a change come over me, and a yellow light would come on in my eyes like those yellow bulbs people use on their porches to cut down on bugs. As soon as I reached that stage where the glint came on in my eyes, I knew I'd found Rat Boy. The sinister thing that looked back at me was me, but was somehow more than me, too, with a powerful life of its own. I could bear looking into those needle eyes for only a second before a chill came over me and I'd have to change back to my frightened, grinning self. It was as if I knew that if I looked too long into those eyes, I wouldn't be able to change back.

Robert, meet Rat Boy, I thought to myself with an evil, self-satisfied smile.

And the next day in class when Wilkerson was out of the room, I introduced them.

I waited till all of the other kids were busy talking or playing games at their desks, and then I started staring at Robert from across the room to get his attention and annoy him at the same time. Pretty soon he felt my eyes on him and began to glare back. Then, when I had him hooked, I got up and left the room quietly, heading for the washroom. You see, I needed a mirror to really do the thing right.

Walking back from the washroom, I had to let my face relax back to normal, but I kept the feeling for Rat Boy right up close to the surface, with a small pilot light burning in my eyes to flare up at the right second.

As soon as I sat down, Robert turned around again to give me an icy look. When his eyes looked into mine with their usual menace, I contorted my face into the preconceived pattern — Rat Boy — and let the pilot light behind my pupils open up full throttle till I could feel the change flicker all the way through me and for an instant I *was* Rat Boy.

In that instant I watched through the eyes of Rat Boy as Robert convulsed in shock. Like he'd looked right into the too-bright light of Rat Boy's eyes and couldn't stand what he saw revealed there. His mouth dropped open and his face contorted in revulsion and fear.

Meanwhile, my face had collapsed from that of Rat Boy into Alan's, my ten-year-old self, but the effect it had on Robert was long-lasting and deep. I don't think he understood what had happened at all, but from that time on, he blustered and swore at me but wouldn't lay a chubby hand within biting distance.

I might have been content to have stopped his merciless persecution of me, but I was afraid the spell might wear off eventually, and anyway, I wanted revenge now that I had him in retreat. As I walked past him that afternoon on our way to get on the

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buses to go home, I was struck with a sudden inspiration.

It was a phrase, really, that I'd heard my mother use about the doctor and that I'd occasionally hear my father use on the phone when discussing business.

"I have an appointment with you, Robert," I rasped in his ear as I walked by.

In the mouth of a ten-year-old, the word *appointment* sounds terribly unnatural and businesslike, with something of portent and menace in its tone. It struck just the right chord in him, because Robert drew back as if I'd just spattered him with hot grease.

Two or three times a week after that, I'd mutter it to him when chance brought us together. "I have an appointment with you," I'd say, and casually drift away, leaving Robert rattled and confused and filled with a sense of coming evil.

I got tired of simply frightening him after a while, and since any threat weakens in proportion to the number of times it's used, I thought I'd better put a little more juice back into it. So I kept my eye on Robert, and when he'd slip out of the room — with Wilkerson's permission when he was there and without it when he wasn't — I'd slip out behind him and follow him to the boy's room.

Half of the time there'd be somebody else there in the washroom from another class, and most of the time Robert only had to take a leak, but one time after lunch I got to the washroom just in time to find it empty and Robert huffing away in a stall. It was the moment I was waiting for.

While Robert huffed and puffed in the stall like a grounded whale, with his pants around his ankles visible beneath the door, I stood in front of the long bathroom mirror that spanned one wall and pressed up close to it. First I took off my glasses. Then I retracted my jaw, projected my teeth, and went through the entire ritual of turning into Rat Boy, but this time there was something breathless and dangerous about it that made it slower. I looked into the eyes in the mirror and waited for that moment of recognition when Rat Boy emerged with a glint around the iris and pupils. I could hear Robert zipping up his pants and rattling the stall door open, and looked over my shoulder to see him emerging from the stall behind me. Robert didn't recognize me from behind, but he looked me in the eyes in the mirror, and the minute our eyes met, I could feel the flash of recognition going through me like a rush of kilowatts.

The next thing I remember is being pulled away from him by Mr. Wilkerson and another teacher. I could see Robert's head twisting away from mine as hard as it could between two metal paper towel dispensers, as if he wanted to press his head right through the wall to get away from me. There

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were four bloody furrows where fingernails had plowed down his cheek, and he was bleeding from the nose and one ear where part of the lobe had been bitten off. It's incredible the amount of blood that can come from a cut ear. And the whole time the teachers were pulling me away, I could hear him screaming like an animal trapped in a burning barn.

I was suspended for three days after that and had to listen to a lot of lectures from both of my parents, a guidance counselor, and the principal and vice principal. But I was strangely unaffected by all of the attention for a normally well-behaved boy, because in a real sense I didn't feel as if I had done anything wrong. You see, it was Rat Boy.

Robert was absent from school more often than he was present after the washroom incident. Either he'd fake sickness at home to stay out, or he'd just hook school and be marked as truant. When they'd catch him, they'd make him go to school for a few days, but before long he'd make a wrong turn on the way to the bus stop and walk down to the railroad tracks instead to spend the day with the other truants. Or he'd wander off by himself to wait for school to let out so he could go home.

The kids from his neighborhood said he was the same old Robert around home, but in school he tried to keep a low profile until he could disappear again for a few days.

Then, in the late spring, he started coming to school more regularly and gradually began to resort to his old bullying. All of the time he'd spent as a truant, he'd been hanging out with older boys from the junior high and high school, and the insouciance of the older hoodlums had rubbed off on him. He was probably a pretty quick study when it came to larceny and mayhem.

His first act as a born-again bully came one day after lunch outside the cafeteria. He had pinned a tall sixth grade boy down on his back and was crouched over his face with a spoon clutched in his angry mitt.

"You know what I could do with this spoon, if I wanted to, queero? I could pop that beady eye right out of your queery little head, that's what." Then he gently touched the point of the spoon to the boy's lid above the eyeball and pressed ever so gently, just to scare him. The boy's face went white and he tried to scream, but Robert had already forced the air out of him with his fat ass.

"It'd go pop, just like that. And you know what I'd do then? I'd stick it in your fat mouth and make you eat it. So next time I ask ya, ya better give me your fuckin' lunch money or you'll wish you had." Then he let the shaken boy up off the ground and strolled lazily down the hall, tapping the spoon he stolen from the cafeteria against the wall with every step.

He still hadn't quite worked up

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enough nerve to threaten me again, but he finally did something that pushed me over the edge anyway.

It happened in class before recess. Robert was sitting behind a girl named Phyllis from the next rectangle of desks across the aisle. Phyllis was a girl I'd known from the first grade and from Sunday school at church since we were both in diapers. She was a quiet girl who had to wear one of those prosthetic hooks from the elbow down where an arm had failed to grow.

While Phyllis was engrossed in a game of ticktacktoe with the girl opposite her one morning in class, with her hooked arm dangling at her side, Robert crawled up quietly behind her on the floor and tied her hook to her chair leg with a shoelace he had unhitched from his sneaker. Then he quietly skidded back to his own chair and waited for her to try to move her arm.

It was several minutes before she tried to move the arm, but finally she let out a little gasp and tried to stand up out of her chair, quickly, as if she'd just noticed that her dress was on fire. She tried for about twenty seconds to pull her hand free, but the shoelace held while she tugged and let out little wordless cries with every failure to free the arm. There was a panic about her tugging — like a rabbit with its foot in a trap — that made me kind of sick. The whole room was horror-stricken by the helpless frenzy of her panic.

She tried to untie the hook with her good free hand when she'd had a little more time to get her wits about her, but the knots were tight and she couldn't budge them one-handed. No one had the courage to try to help by untying her — they didn't want to have to touch that hook.

Luckily, Wilkerson came back into the room before anybody had to or before Phyllis began to get hysterical. He cut her loose with a little penknife, and the look he gave the class after he'd freed her made us all squirm in our chairs with guilt. There wasn't a person in the room who didn't know who had done it and who wouldn't have cheered if they saw Robert tied to a burning stake, screaming as the flames ran up his pant legs, or who wouldn't have thrown the switch on the electric chair if he'd been strapped into it. But no one came forward to denounce him.

"Who did this?" demanded Wilkerson in a hollow voice we'd never heard him use before. He was so mad he looked almost like a different person, with his face all red beneath his thatch of light brown hair — except where the pressure of his jaw muscles' clenching made the flesh white just below his sideburns.

Nobody answered. Although the urge to indict Robert was burning in all of our hearts, only two or three of us had actually seen Robert commit

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the act, and those who had were afraid of his reprisals.

In an instant I found myself on my feet, saying in a voice far more fearless and confident than I actually was, "It was Robert, Mr. Wilkerson. I saw him do it."

When Wilkerson ordered Robert to the principal's office and followed him out of the room, I was still standing. Everybody watched me as I sat down. You'd think I'd just walked on water or something.

Robert was given a lecture and a two-day suspension, but he had to come back to class and finish the day until the buses came to take us home.

At lunch that afternoon, Robert walked up to my table where I sat with my friends and delivered himself of some venom. Across the table, he loomed over Jerry Kennedy, the kid he'd choked, and spat his insult at me.

"You little rat, Alan. You goddamn little rat."

His choice of words made me smile. Then he realized what he'd said, and some memory of our encounter in the boy's room came back to him suddenly. He took two steps backward. I kept right on smiling, and though I didn't actually say a word, I know my eyes communicated to him what I was thinking just as if I'd called him up on the phone:

"I have an appointment with you," my eyes said to him. He backed away as if from a rabid dog.

• • •

Unexpectedly, Alan Cooperman paused in the middle of his monologue, while his wife waited for him to continue. When the pause began to lengthen and he still failed to pick up the narrative thread, she interjected impatiently.

"Is that it?"

"You asked what it was I mumbled while we were reading, so I told you. Rat Boy. Just what I said."

"And that's it? That's the deep, dark secret I had to pry out of you? Christ," Lisa huffed, "I'm sorry I asked.

"No. That's not all of it. There's a little more," he returned almost apologetically.

Lisa waited, knowing that the best strategy now was just to sit tight. After a nervous throat clearing, Alan continued.

"I . . . I think I might have done something terrible. I think I . . . might have killed him.

"Not as myself," he hurried to add. "I mean, as Rat Boy.

"They found his body by the railroad tracks two nights later, horribly mutilated. His nose had been bitten off.

"I . . . had waited for him the next day at school, but he never showed up — must have been playing hooky, afraid I'd get him when he came back to class. The second day after our encounter in the cafeteria, I stayed home from school myself, pretending sickness till my mother was out of the

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house to go to work. I was pretty responsible around home, so my mother thought she could trust me alone at home for one day while I was sick. Little did she know.

"About eleven o'clock in the morning after a little television, I went upstairs to the bathroom mirror and — you know, sort of got into character. I saw the old familiar light go on in the eyes, bingo, and the next thing I knew, my mother was coming in the front door from work. It was 5:30. I was standing soaking wet in all of my clothes in a puddle of water in front of the bathroom mirror, staring into my eyes the way you stare sometimes when you're oblivious to the world. I had lost four or five hours somewhere. The instant I heard the front door open, I came to, got out of my wet clothes, threw them in the hamper, and slipped on my pajamas and bathrobe. When I heard the news about Robert the next day, after they'd found him by the railroad, I threw up."

"And so, naturally, you thought that it was *you* who killed him. It couldn't have been wild dogs or something? Or some maniac?"

"Yeah, maybe."

Lisa paused for several heartbeats, then mused to the still air. "And you've been carrying this around inside you all of these years, this belief that you or Rat Boy or something had somehow killed that hateful little brat. That's why you're still so shy, why you're always holding something back from me, why you can never quite let go of yourself. . . ."

Alan suddenly felt disemburdened, as if relieved of a great, oppressive weight. He thought that perhaps they had at last broken through the barriers that had inhibited their relationship from the start and that had lately seemed so divisive.

"Well, Alan," Lisa concluded with a sniff, "I think that is just sick. My God, is that sick."

Something inside Alan Cooperman deflated like an inner tube.

Then the phone rang before he could mumble a lame protest. His wife's voice, as she answered the phone, seemed to reproach him with every syllable as she spoke into the mouthpiece, turning away and cradling the white plastic with her face. Her voice had a strained edge to it as she spoke, as if trying unsuccessfully to sound casual.

"No . . . no . . . yes . . . I really can't say," her voice said noncommitally. "Me, too," she said before hanging up. "Good-bye."

"That was him again, wasn't it?" Alan protested, surprising himself with his sudden intuition.

"Alan. . . ."

"That was him again, wasn't it, wasn't it?" he insisted. He felt sick when she didn't answer.

"Alan," she began, "We were going to tell you. . . ."

"We?" This was it, then, he

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thought, remembering her solemn promises — this was finally it.

"Alan," her voice persisted after him as he walked rubber-legged and dizzy from the room. "I'm sorry, Alan, I'm really sorry. . . ."

The slamming of the bedroom door put a period to her sentence. Then the bathroom door slammed.

Standing before the bathroom sink, Alan lifted a clean, neatly folded towel from off the rack and pressed his face quietly into it, crying softly. The towel muffled his sobs and absorbed the tears that squeezed from his eyes. It's over, he kept thinking to himself with the smell of the clean laundered towel in his nostrils; this time it's really over.

After several minutes he put the towel aside and regarded his grief-stricken face in the mirror. Seeing the red-rimmed eyes and the tear-laden lashes sobered him up. It's impossible for a man to look himself in the face and observe his own grief, he thought. He grinned idiotically.

Then the grin disappeared and no new expression moved in to replace it. His face was a blank, waiting for a new expression to fill it like an empty TV screen.

He smiled again, self-consciously, raised his eyebrows, and wiggled his ears. He forgot all about his trouble, looking into the mirror. He lowered his brows and thrust out his chin till his face took on a half-human expression. The Neanderthal, he thought, twisting his head to the side for a better view. Then he erased that expression as if cleaning a slate and started anew.

This time he thrust out his two front teeth and retracted his jaw. When the rest of his face looked right, he stared into the eyes, squinting, and waited for something. When a glint sparked from both eyes, he suddenly remembered what it was he was waiting for. With the new mustache and the five o'clock shadow, it somehow looked different.

"Rat Man," he christened the new thing, and stepped quietly into the hall.

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BEGINNING WITH BONE

The other day I found myself trapped on a dais at a luncheon at which I was not scheduled to talk. That, in itself, placed a frown on my youthful face. Why chivvy me into sitting at the dais instead of at a table with my dear wife, Janet, if they were not going to be making any use of me.

Of course, I would be introduced, which meant I could at least rise and smile prettily. It turned out, though, that the introducer had never heard of me, and so mangled my name when she tried to pronounce it, that I aborted my rise quickly and refused to smile.

So it didn't look as though it were going to be my day. In sheer desparation, I occupied myself in writing a naughty limerick for the woman who sat to my left, and who *did* know me. (In fact, she was responsible for my being stuck there.)

I suppose she noted that I was looking rather grim, so she undertook to cheer me up by bringing me to the attention of others. She turned to the man on *her* left and said, "Look at this funny limerick that Dr. Isaac Asimov has written for me."

The businessman looked at it with lackluster eye and then looking up at me, said, "Are you a writer by any chance?"

Well! I don't expect people to read my stuff necessarily, but read it or not, I do expect them to have at

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least a vague suspicion that I'm a writer.

My friend at the left, noting that my hand was creeping toward the knife beside my plate, said hurriedly, "Oh, he *is*. He has written three hundred fifty books."

Unimpressed, the fellow said, "Three hundred fifty limericks?"

"No, three hundred fifty *books*."

There then took place the following conversation between the man and me.

Man (unwilling to let go of the limericks): "Are you Irish?"

Asimov: "No."

Man: "Then how can you write limericks?"

Asimov: "I was born in Russia and write odessas."*

Man (looking blank): "Do you use a word-processor?"

Asimov: "Yes."

Man: "Can you imagine getting along without one now?"

Asimov: "Sure."

Man (paying no attention): "Can you imagine what might have happened to 'War and Peace' if Dostoevski had had a word-processor?"

Asimov (scornfully): "Nothing at all, since 'War and Peace' was written by Tolstoy."

That ended the conversation and I turned my attention to surviving the lunch — which I did, but not by much.

All is not lost, however. Having met with a bonehead, it struck me that I would start my next F&SF essay by considering bone.

Life, as we know it on Earth, is carried on in a watery base in which molecules of various sizes are dissolved or suspended. On the whole, this means that life-forms are apt to be soft and squashy, like earthworms, for instance. It is possible to get by in a soft and squashy way, and all of life managed to do so until the Earth was nearly seven-eighths its present age. It is only comparatively recently that life developed hardness.

Of course, even at its softest and squashiest, bits of life couldn't simply exist as watery solutions immersed in the ocean. It would be dispersed and washed away. Each bit of life had to have some outer pellicle that would keep the molecular machinery of life together and

**In the very unlikely chance that you don't get this, Limerick is a town in southwestern Ireland, and Odessa one in southwestern Russia.*

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separate it from the surrounding ocean.

This was done by building up macromolecules (chains of small molecules) to form cell membranes. Plant cells, concentrating on sugar units, built up cellulose out of long chains of glucose molecules, and that is now the most common organic molecule in existence. Cellulose is the major component of wood. Cotton, linen, and paper are practically pure cellulose.

Animal cells do not make cellulose. They concentrate on other macromolecules (proteins, for instance) for the job. The tough protein, keratin, is a major component of skin, scales, hair, nails, hooves and claws. Another tough protein, collagen, is to be found in ligaments, tendons, and in connective tissue generally.

But about 600,000,000 years ago, quite suddenly on the evolutionary scale, various animal groups ("phyla") developed the trick of using inorganic substances as protective walls. These were essentially rocky in nature and were harder, stronger, and more impervious to the environment than anything built out of organic materials. (They were also heavier, less sensitive, less responsive and often forced those creatures weighed down by the material to take up a motionless life.)

These "skeletons" served not only as protection, but as a good place to attach muscles, which could then pull harder and more powerfully. Futhermore, it is these hard parts that make up the bulk of the fossil remnants of life that we find in sedimentary rock. Being rock-like in nature, they can easily undergo changes (under the proper circumstances) that make them more rock-like still. They can then retain their original shape and form for hundreds of millions of years. It is for this reason that fossils are common only in rocks younger than 600,000,000 years. Before that, there were no hard parts to fossilize.

The simplest animals to develop a skeleton were the one-celled "radiolarians." These microscopic creatures have beautiful skeletons of intricate inorganic spicules composed of "silica" or "silicon dioxide" — which is the characteristic substance making up sand.

Silica, however, although exceedingly common, did not become the general skeletal material. It is apparently too difficult for organisms to handle. Human beings, for instance, in common with animal life, generally, do not contain any silicon compounds as essential parts of our bodies. Any such compounds present are just temporarily there as impurities swallowed with our food.

Beginning with the simplest multicellular animals, there developed

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a tendency for forming skeletons made out of calcium compounds, particularly calcium carbonate, which is also known as "limestone."

The sea-shells of members of the phylum, Mollusca (clams, oysters, snails) are made of calcium carbonate. This is also true for members of other phyla such as coral, bryozoans, lampshells and so on. For that matter, the egg-shells formed by reptiles and birds are also calcium carbonate.

The phylum Arthropoda, however, struck a compromise. They did not get bogged down beneath a heavy shell that left them with oyster-like immobility. They avoided inorganic strengthening altogether and remained with organic macromolecules. They improved on those, however.

The arthropods (which include such creatures as lobsters, crabs, shrimps, insects of all kinds, spiders, scorpions, centipedes and so on) all have a skeleton of "chitin," from a Greek word for a coat of armor, or shell.

Chitin is a macromolecule built up of sugar units very much as cellulose is, but with a difference. Whereas cellulose is built up of glucose units (glucose being a very common and simple sugar), chitin is built up of glucosamine units. The glucoses in the chitin chain are each modified by the presence of a small nitrogen-containing group, and this suffices to make chitin quite different from cellulose in its properties.

Chitin is tough enough to serve as protection; it is flexible as well, and it is light enough to allow rapid active movement. Indeed, insects, despite their thin skeletons of chitin, are mobile enough to fly. (Of course, they can do so only at the cost of remaining very small.)

Chitin may well be one of the reasons why the arthropods are so amazingly successful. There are far more species of arthropods than there are species of all the other phyla put together.

This brings us to Chordata, the last phylum to come into existence (from starfish-like ancestors), about 550,000,000 years ago. What differentiates chordates from all other creatures is that they have, first, a nerve cord that is hollow and not solid, and that runs along the back and not along the belly. Secondly, they have gill slits through which they can pass water and filter out food (though in land dwelling chordates, these show signs of developing only in the embryonic stage). Thirdly, they have a stiffening rod, called a notochord, running parallel to the nerve

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cord (though, again, the notochord may only be present in embryonic or in larval stages).

The notochord is made up of collagen, chiefly, and is an example of an internal skeleton, rather than the external skeletons found in other phyla. Internal skeletons are found, to a fumbling extent, in a few other places in the other phyla, but only the chordates went on to specialize in it. They went further than the arthropods. They left the outer skin unprotected, and left the skeleton inside where it could serve to maintain shape and integrity and be an anchor to muscles. The softness and vulnerability of unprotected skin is more than made up for by strength, power, and mobility that chordates can develop, thanks to the relatively light but strong internal skeleton. It is no wonder that the largest, most powerful, fastest, most intelligent and, in general, the most successful animals who have ever lived are chordates.

Early in the chordate history, the simple rod of the notochord was replaced by a series of separate bits of skeletal tissue that actually enclosed the nerve cord, giving it additional protection. These separate bits of skeleton are called "vertebrae" and they make up the "spinal column." Nowadays, all chordates, but for three groups of very primitive out-of-the-way organisms, possess vertebrae. They make up the subphylum, Vertebrata, and are the "vertebrates."

The earliest vertebrates, which evolved about 510,000,000 years ago, were the first to develop bone. This was an inorganic skeletal material that was composed of calcium compounds, but was not quite calcium carbonate. This bone was restricted to the outside of the body, especially in the head region, and these early vertebrates were called "ostracoderms" ("shell-skin" in Greek). The vertebrae inside the body were cartilage, which was made up again, chiefly of collagen.

The external skeleton of the ostracoderms limited mobility, however, and, in general, this was not a successful device. Vertebrates without outer armor, who relied on mobility and agility, did better. Even today, those chordates with outer armor, such as turtles, armadillos and pangolins, are not notably successful.

Ostracoderms developed in two directions. They developed more elaborate internal skeletons, including cartilaginous extensions that made four limbs possible, and other extensions that made movable jaws possible. They then lost the outer armor and became the sharks and related organisms of today. The sharks have no armor and retain a cartilage skeleton (though their teeth are of a bone-like material). They

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have remained successful to the present day.

In the other direction, the ostrocoderms with limbs and jaws did not simply get rid of their outer armor, but withdrew some of it under the skin. The armor that had protected the head became a skull to protect the brain and sense organs. Bone spread to the rest of the skeleton, too. In this way, the "Osteichthyes" (Greek for "bony fish") developed about 420,000,000 years ago, and still dominate the waters of the earth.

From the bony fish, the amphibians evolved; from the amphibians, the reptiles evolved; from the reptiles, the birds and mammals evolved. All of these have retained the bony internal skeleton. That, of course, includes you. It is your mark as a vertebrate. Nothing that is not vertebrate has bone.

Bone, like oyster shells, is a calcium compound. How do bones differ from oyster shells, then?

The first person to do a successful chemical analysis of bone was the Swedish mineralogist Johann Gottlieb Gahn (1745-1818). He made use of the then-new method of blow-pipe analysis. The blow-pipe produced a small, hot flame in which minerals could be heated. The manner of their melting or vaporizing, the colors they formed, the characteristics of their ash could all be interpreted by a skilled practitioner. In 1770, Gahn subjected bone to blow-pipe analysis and found it contained calcium phosphate, whose molecule, as you can tell from its name, contains a phosphorus atom.

In last month's essay, I described how phosphorus had been discovered just a century before Gahn's finding. It had been obtained from urine, which suggested it might be a component of the body (or just an impurity that was cast out in the urine as fast as possible). Gahn was the first to point out a specific place in the body where it could be found. It existed in bone.

However, bone exists only in vertebrates. What about non-vertebrate animals? What about plants? Is phosphorus only to be found in one place, or might it be a universal component of all life-forms?

In 1804, a Swiss biologist, Nicolas Theodore de Saussure (1767-1845), published a number of analyses of different plants, of the water-soluble minerals they contained and of the ash obtained when they had been burned. He invariably found phosphates present, which could indicate that phosphorus compounds were a universal constituent of plant life, and possibly of all life.

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On the other hand, plants might take up miscellaneous atoms from the soil in which they grew, even a relative few for which they had no use. In that case, since plants did not have the efficient excretory system of animals, they might simply store the unnecessary atoms in odd corners of their tissues, and they would be there to show up in analysis. Thus, Saussure also discovered small quantities of silicon compounds and aluminum compounds in plant ash and, to this day, we have no clear evidence that either silicon or aluminum are essential components of life.

We might work from the other end and find out what elements contributed to plant growth. It was clear from earliest times that when plants were cultivated, they withdrew vital matter from the soil, and, if this were not restored the soil gradually became infertile. By hit or miss, various animal products were found to work as "fertilizers" — blood, ground bones, decaying fish, and so on. The most common fertilizer, because it was so handy, was animal (or human) manure. So commonly was it used that, to this day, "fertilizer" is a genteel synonym for manure, which is itself from an old French word meaning "to cultivate" and is a genteel synonym for you-know-what.

The trouble with manure and other animal products is that they are so complex, chemically speaking, that we can't be sure what components do the actual fertilizing because they are essential to plant growth, and which are only along for the ride.

In the 19th Century, however, there was a drive to replace manure. For one thing, manure stinks (as we all know) and makes a travesty of the "fresh air" of the countryside. For another, it carries disease germs, and probably did its bit to initiate and make worse the epidemics that struck the world in the old days.

The German chemist, Justus von Liebig (1803-1873), was the first to study chemical fertilizers in detail and, by 1855, he had made it quite plain that phosphates were essential to fertilization.

If phosphates are essential to plants and, presumably, to animals, then they must be found elsewhere than in bones. They must be present in the soft tissues, and that means there must be some organic compounds built up of the ordinary elements found in some substances (carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur), but with phosphorus atoms in addition.

Such a compound was actually found, even before Liebig had worked

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out his fertilizer system. In 1845, a French chemist, Nicolas Theodor Gobley (1811-1876), was studying the fatty matter in egg yolk. He obtained a substance whose molecules he hydrolyzed (that is, broke apart with the addition of water) and obtained fatty acids. This is what is to be expected of any self-respecting fat. He also obtained, however, "glycerophosphoric acid," an organic molecule containing a phosphorus atom. In 1850, he named the original substance "lecithin," from the Greek word for "egg yolk."

Gobley was not able to get the exact chemical analysis, but we now know what it is. The lecithin molecule is made up of 42 carbon atoms, 84 hydrogen atoms, 9 oxygen atoms, 1 nitrogen atom, and 1 phosphorus atom. Only 1 phosphorus atom out of 137 atoms altogether, but that is enough to establish the existence of organic phosphates.

There are other similar compounds that have since been discovered and that are called, as a group, "phosphoglycerides."

Actually, the phosphoglycerides might also be considered skeletal matter. They help make up the cell membranes and the insulating material about nerve cells. In fact, the white matter of brain (white because of the presence of thick layers of insulating fatty material about the nerve fibers) is particularly rich in phosphoglycerides.

When this was first discovered, it was thought that phosphorus had something to do with mental function, and the slogan arose, "No phosphorus, no thought." In a way, that was right, since if the nerve fibers are not properly insulated, they won't work, and we won't think. That, however, is an indirect connection. We might as well say, since kidneys are essential to human life, "no kidney, no thought," which is true enough, but which doesn't mean that we think with our kidneys.

It was also discovered that fish were reasonably rich in phosphorus, from which arose the myth that fish were "brain food." This, in popular food mythology, must be second only to the notion (fostered by good old Popeye) that spinach is the gateway to instant superhuman strength. Bertie Wooster, that lovable but dim-witted young man created by P. G. Wodehouse, was always urging his intelligent man-servant, Jeeves, to eat a few sardines whenever some particularly urgent problem arose.

Once lecithin was discovered, the dam broke. Other organic phosphates were found. Phosphate groups were found to be part of proteins in milk, eggs and meat. Obviously, phosphorus was essential to life itself and not just to the skeletal background.

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But what does phosphorus and all those phosphate groups *do*? It's not enough just to be there. They must do something.

The first hint in that direction came in 1904, when the English biochemist Arthur Harden (1865-1904) was studying yeast, trying to work out the chemical details of how it ferments sugar into alcohol. It did this as a result of the presence of enzymes, and, in those days, nothing more was known about enzymes than the name (Greek for "in yeast") and the fact that they brought about chemical changes.

Harden placed the ground-up yeast, containing the enzymes, in a bag made of a membrane that was porous enough to allow small molecules, but not big ones, to pass through. After he kept the bag in a vat of water long enough to allow all the small molecules to escape, he found that the material inside the membrane would no longer ferment sugar. That did not mean that the enzyme was a small molecule that had escaped, for the outside water could not ferment sugar either. However, if the material in the vat and in the bag were mixed, the two together could ferment sugar.

In this way, Harden showed that an enzyme consisted of a large molecule (enzyme) working with a small molecule (co-enzyme) in cooperation. The small enzyme, Harden found, contained phosphorus. (For a fuller account, see THE BIOCHEMICAL KNIFE-BLADE, F&SF, November 1985).

This meant that phosporus was involved in the molecular changes that took place in the tissues, directly involved. Phosphates were part of coenzymes that worked with many enzymes and that was not all.

Yeast extract ferments sugar quite rapidly at first, but as time goes on the level of activity drops off. The natural assumption is that the enzyme breaks down with time. In 1905, however, Harden showed that this could not be so. If he added inorganic phosphate to the solution, the enzyme went back to work as hard as ever, and the inorganic phosphate disappeared.

What happened to the inorganic phosphate? It had to add on to something. Harden searched and discovered that two phosphate groups had added on to a simple sugar, fructose. The molecule that resulted, "fructose-1, 6-disphosphate," is sometimes called Harden-Young ester, in honor of Harden and his co-worker, W. J. Young.

Harden-Young ester is an example of a "metabolic intermediate," a compound formed in the course of metabolism, in places between the starting point (sugar) and the ending point (alcohol). Again, once the

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first step was taken, others followed and many other phosphorus-containing metabolic intermediates were discovered.

But why should these phosphorus-containing metabolic intermediates be important? The German-American biochemist Fritz Albert Lipmann (1899-1986) glimpsed the answer in 1941. He noticed that most organic phosphates, when they were hydrolyzed and the phosphate group broken off, liberated a certain amount of energy, about the amount one might expect.

On the other hand, when a few phosphate esters were hydrolyzed, they liberated a rather greater amount of energy. Lipmann therefore began to speak of a low-energy phosphate bond and a high-energy phosphate bond.

Food contains a great deal of chemical energy, and when it is broken down it yields more energy all together than the body can easily absorb. There is a danger that most of the energy would be lost. However, as the metabolic chain progresses, every once in a while enough energy is produced to change a low-energy phosphate bond into a high-energy one. That contains a convenient amount of energy.

It is as though food consisted of hundred dollar bills that the body couldn't find change for, but when it was broken down and formed high energy phosphate bonds, it was as though the hundred dollar bills were broken up into many five dollar bills, each of which is easily negotiable.

The most common and ubiquitous of the high-energy phosphate bonds in the body are those belonging to a molecule called "adenosine triphosphate" (ATP), and it is this which is *the* energy handler of the body. For a few years, ATP were considered the initials of the key phosphorus compound of life.

However, as long ago as 1869, a Swiss chemist, Johann Friedrich Mischer (1844-1895), isolated something from pus, which was an organic substance that contained phosphorus. He reported this to his boss, the German biochemist Ernst Felix Immanuel Hoppe-Seyler (1825-1895), who was dubious about the worth of the discovery. At that time, lecithin, discovered 24 years earlier, was still the only phosphorus-containing organic substance known, and Hoppe-Seyler wasn't anxious to make a fool of himself by allowing his laboratory to report a second until he was *sure*. (That's responsible science!) After two years, he had isolated the substance from other places, too, and finally came to the conclusion that it was an authentic discovery.

Because cell nuclei seemed to be particularly rich in the substance,

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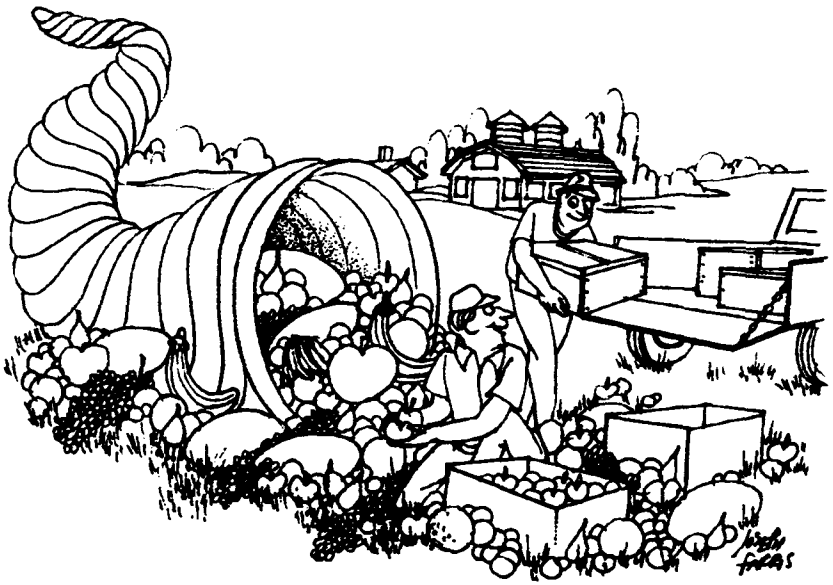
it was called "nuclein." Later, as its chemistry was better worked out, it became "nucleic acid."

For the rest of the story, see THE CINDERELLA COMPOUND (F&SF, April 1973). To sum up, beginning in 1944, nucleic acid — particularly the variety known as "deoxyribonucleic acid" (DNA) — is now viewed as the key to life and its fundamental component. It is the blueprint for protein construction, and it is the proteins (especially those that are enzymes) that control the chemistry of the cell and makes the difference between thee and me, and between either of us and an oak tree, or an amoeba.

It would probably be oversimplifying the matter, but I am strongly tempted to say, "All life is nucleic acid; the rest is commentary."

(I can't help but think of Coeurl, the felinoid monster in A. E. van Vogt's great story "Black Destroyer," who lived on a planet from which all the phosphorus had sunk into unavailability — and then he sensed the phosphorus in the bones of the human explorers that had just arrived by spaceship. And that appeared in 1939, well before the importance of nucleic acid was understood.)



"This certainly beats farming!"

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Michael Shea's latest is a comic nightmare set in the near future and concerning the shooting of a movie: an alien invasion flick featuring man-eating spiders . . .

The Extra

BY
MICHAEL SHEA

What made me decide to go down and sign up for a movie? It was as casual as could be. One day the notion was nowhere near my mind, and the next morning I was doing it.

I was hanging out at the zoo — where else? — with all the other monkeys. I was leaning against the wall between Vic's Liquors and Freddie Photon's Fast Holo Hut, and listening as hard as I could to try to catch what I was thinking, which seemed to be nothing much. And a friend of mine stepped up, Japhet Starkey, white dude, a big grin on him.

"Hey, Professor," he said. "You look deep, babe. What's the haps?"

"Hey, blood. *You* look high and bright. Doing yourself some good?"

He gave me a wise look, lots of heavy eyebrow. "You just said it, Rufus. That's exactly what I'm doing."

Down along the wall from us, a peaceful little shakedown that had been going on struck some sparks and flared up in a brawl. The crowd swelled out to make some watching room. It picked us up and washed us along the balcony, past the Holo Hut all the way to the Digital Dominoes Den. Japhet shouted in my ear: "Now we can grab some rail!"

So we worked our way across the balcony. I never swam before I got here, but it was like swimming. Your moves had to be firm but smooth; you had to stroke your way through. Otherwise someone you stepped too hard on might pull you under and stomp you. We made it to the shaft and leaned on the rail. A brawl or shooting farther in always cleared spaces out at the rail.

"So what it is," Japh told me. "I'm

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going down tomorrow and sign up for a movie."

Now I was the one making eyebrows. "Fool! Why you wanna do that?"

And he just laughed and waved his arm at the shaft. Not that I needed the answer. Thirty more stories of balconies over us, twenty below, all the rails jammed with welfare monkeys like us, all the walkways crisscrossing the shaft at every level jammed with more of same. Even the air in the shaft was jammed, packed so tight with zoo noise you could reach over the rail and tear off a handful of it. You could hear gunshots over it pretty well, though, and we did, just then. We look up and see a guy come sailing over the rail six or seven levels up.

"Third one down!" Japh shouted.

"Fourth down!" I shouted, because I judged the guy's arc to be a little flatter than Japh did. But he was right: guy jounced off the rail of the third walkway below us before he snapped back out and kept falling. So I double-palmed Japh and gave him a food credit.

"So what's the flick?" I asked him.

"*Alien Web.*"

"Sure, I said. "Pluton Studios. Historical sci-fi, set in the late twentieth, alien invasion flick." I had a kind of name for always being in the library, and I liked to play up to it. I only read the dailies now and then, but I liked the entertainment news and kept pretty good track of it. Japhet looked pleased, and sly.

"That's it, Rufus. That's my ticket. And you could do it, too, hey? Why not?"

"You some kind of crazy, Japh? — Motherfucker!" This I didn't say to Japh, but because there was a hand in my pocket that wasn't mine. I whipped around punching, and some sorry little blood in snakelocks backed off. He had a friend, but Japhet stepped in beside me, and they faded back into the crowd.

"What are you sayin' to me?" I said to Japh. "You might be desperate, but I'm not. Not nearly. *I'm* not tired of living."

"Not tired of living here?" He was smiling. He looked serene. And I realized then that he was going to do what he said, he really was.

It rubbed me two ways at once. I admired him, jacking his spirit for a gamble like that. It made me restless, made me want to do something for myself, too. But I liked to come up with things on my own. I didn't like being jerked around by other people's inspirations.

"Not that tired," I told him. "Tell me you ain't serious. You even got tube fare out to the studios, fool?"

"I, my good spook, have got tube fare for *two*."

It moved me. You couldn't count on staying together once you got into a movie, but it would make him feel a little more lucky not to be walking up

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to something like that alone. It would me, too. The whole proposition was starting to seem realer now, but I still felt too jacked around by it. I shook my head.

"I got my Aunt Harriet to look after. Got to pick her up any minute now at the Hut."

"Hey. Rufus. Buy her a decade in one of the Cinetrons. In two days, if you come back, you can buy both yourselves five or ten years on the farm."

"What station you be at? What time?" And I stood there asking myself, Did I just *say* that? Japhet laughed, whacked my shoulder, and told me.

"Don't wait if I don't show," I told him.

And that's how simple it was, really. My mind couldn't swing with it without a fight, of course. I hadn't swum halfway back across the balcony before I shook my head and decided, Fuck this, there was no way I'd show tomorrow. But I couldn't leave the idea alone. In the Hut I hung around watching the seniors triggering away their last games before the three o'clock escort left. You've met Aunt Harriet — she's pushing eighty, was my momma's oldest sister out of nine. It always made me smile to see her blasting those fast holos, a mean peppery old lady full of fight. If she'd still had legs for running, *she* would've goen straight down to Pluton Studios. What was I doing that had good legs, the last ones left in our family, that was down to just the two of us?

The Hut had good escorts — well paid and would show some fight — which was why it was one of this level's senior hangouts. You couldn't stay in your eight-by-ten all day, video and pap stamps or no video and pap stamps. I usually walked my aunt back anyway like a lot of the seniors' family would do, because the escorts might be tough, but there was still only twelve of them.

I didn't have to use my sap today — no one tried to get past their shields and prods. We all stood on the belt out to our complex, and my aunt was raging and bitching about all her ailments, and I was scoffing and cussing her for being a sissy the way she liked me to do, and meanwhile, what do you think I was thinking about? About all the graffiti in the library books.

That's right. The tapes can't be messed with, except for all the reading terminals being kicked to shit and half out of focus, but I liked to read the old books, too. A lot of them hadn't been put on tape and never would be. The past's so vast and the world's so wide, right? The strangest things would pop out of those books and swell around you if you pried at the dim parts here and there with a dictionary. I won't get started on it —it was a thing with me, a place where I could go to breathe. But that

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graffiti. I got a knack for reading, somehow, and I could follow text through so many layers of fuck-you's and eat-me's you wouldn't believe it, but I didn't have X ray. And there was no way around it either when you'd be reading along hot on something and come to that six or sixty pages that had been razored right out. So now I stood there thinking about those books, how trying to see what was in them was like trying to see out a dirty window. And that's what staying here was — spending your life trying to see something, anything, out of a cracked, dirty window.

"Auntie," I said, "I'm gonna buy you a decade at one of the Cinetrons."

"With what?"

"My pap script. I be eating out tomorrow."

"Huh! You gonna leave me your sap? You know how mine hurt my hand now with this damn arthritis."

"Nope. I'm gonna leave you my roscoe."

"What?! Where the hell you goin', Rufus, leavin' your roscoe?"

"To a safe place, don't need any gun. Can't take one in there anyway."

I think that probably told her. "Huh! Safe place!" But she didn't say anything else. She understood.

Early next morning I took her to a Cinetron where she'd only seen four of the ten flicks running. I checked the food pack they gave her, went in and checked that her seat's potty worked. One of the guards of her section was a dude I knew, and I gave him my last two credits to keep an eye out for her. I gave her a kiss just before the lights went down. I had to say something, so I said: "When I come back, maybe we go to the farm for a while."

She wouldn't look at me, and damn if there weren't tears in her eyes. "You a good boy, Rufus," she said.

"You a nasty crusty little old lady," I told her. My eyes got a little wet, too, going out of there, but I felt good, light and ready. So we just go down and see what happens, I told myself, but either way, fuck this zoo for good. I went on down to the station and found Japhet, and the way he grinned to see me made me feel better yet.

When the tube pulled in, we hooked arms, saps in our free hands, and avalanched in with the crowd. We had good position, in line with the door. We were squeezed up off our feet and poured straight into the car. When the crowd spread to fill it, our feet touched down and we hugged a pole and held it.

The tube took off. There was just enough room for someone to work a hand free and start messing with my unit. I stomped some toes at a guess, and the hand pulled back. I helped Japh evict another hand from his pocket, and then we hit the next station. The big padded pneumatic packers gently wedged another fifty people on board, and we didn't have to

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protect anything after that because no one could move anything. We floated peacefully at two hundred klicks per, the weight shifts playing our ribs like squeeze-boxes on the curves.

The studio had shuttles at the Seventh South Exurb station. Half our trainload seemed to be going to Pluton. The shuttles filled up in five minutes and drove off with us.

It was always great to get outside. There it was all over you — the sky! It was pale yellow, and you could make out little clouds in it — real ones — here and there. There was even a breeze. It made my mind feel wide open, lucky.

Some of that leaked away as we got near the set. The set has to scare you, whatever it looks like, if you're an extra. This one was about a klick and a half square, late twentieth office buildings and high-rise apartments sticking up out of it along with church steeples, power poles, billboards, big trees here and there. You couldn't really see into it because it was walled, and also pretty well surrounded by the studio buildings. A bunch of small aircraft were swarming around above it — two different styles, the aliens and the home team. Special Effects was limbering its robots for the air battle.

They let us off at the studio canteen just outside one of the big gates in the set's wall. The call was for two thousand extras, and the shuttles could bring back the quota in one more trip to the station. They drove back, and we went in to breakfast. I had bacon and coffee. Real! I can't tell you. Japh and me sat there chewing and staring at each other, stupefied. Other people had eggs, pancakes — no could believe it. The noise was happy. People kept shouting jokes like: "Hey, I don't got a copy of the script yet!" — and everyone laughed at them over and over.

The Costume Department had big processing trailers pulled up outside when they filed us out. We went in raw at one end and came out ready at the other. First a strip search. Then repairs on people looking too outrageously zoo — old style shirts to hide tit rings, hats to bag snakelocks, scrapeoffs for facepaint. You got shoes if you thought yours weren't good for running. The crews were ace, sized you at a look. I was out in twenty minutes — I just needed my Day-Glo throat tattoo painted over. The second load of extras was already in the canteen when they sent us on out to the bleachers.

The bleachers were set up near the gate with an empty speaking platform in front of them. There wasn't all that much to watch while we waited for the rest. A lot was going on around us, but mostly in the buildings where all the communications and monitors and master controls were. There were crews of techs zipping around in their little carts, and

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maintenance trucks driving in and out the gate. Some of the camera rafts were testing their air cushions, dropping fast to the ground on a big whoosh of blowers. They don't land outright for payoffs. They can get back up to hover a fraction faster off the air cushion, and camera time's everything in these big one-take shoots. People in the bleachers wanting to sound pro about being an extra kept calling the rafts moneyboats. If any were vets, they weren't passing out any tips. How could it help here anyway, what they'd found on other sets in different stories?

Now the last of the second load was taking seats, and the costume trailers were closing up. Everyone was talking about the script and what the aliens might be, and since no one knew shit about either one, it made lively conversation. Two trucks came out of the gate, and a team of Actors Guild reps and studio people got out of the first one. They stood around the platform, and the guild's mediator walked up onto it.

She was a young honey, dressed very zoo, hair in snakes and all her tattoos on one arm with a see-through sleeve on it and her other arm bare. I wanted to laugh. For sure she had a condo somewhere uptown.

"Man!" Japhet grinned. "A nice, fat, do-nothing *job*."

That was the truth. Guild reps never got sweaty driving a bargain. Where was the room for parley with the studios? It was simple economics, like this: For some reason, all you chimps on these benches want money; and furthermore, not a chimp of you'd *be* on these benches if you had any kind of job at all or any chance to ever get one. Right? Right! So here's the terms.

The honey said she and the rep team had just finished their drive-through, and the set was up to the contract's specs. She gave us the wise eyeball saying it, like we were all zoo together and no one snuck any shit past *her*. She skinned down the specs to us from her pocket display.

We learned plenty, but it was the APPs, the refuges, and the weapons that made up the gist of the odds. The Anti Personnel Properties were the aliens. There were a thousand of them. They weighed eighty-five kilos and ran as fast as a healthy man. They had no projectile weaponry and had to get hold of you to kill you. Then the refuges. In the set, one out of ten of all the doors, gates, and other entryways could actually be opened. Half of these led into actual rooms that were "viable for defense," and three-quarters of these contained "some implement viable as a weapon."

We'd get a half hour pre-shoot run-through of the set to spock out resources and survival plans. The shoot would last an hour. The pot was twenty million, split by the survivors. The bonus for killing an APP

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was ten thousand, paid at the scene by the camera rafts when you gave them your kill's claim tag. Any cash already in the pockets of survivors when they reached the paygate was theirs. This was an arty touch. Say you want real turmoil in those streets? Muggings in the middle of alien death?

A cart pulled up a trailer with a whole rack of terminals mounted on it. They called us down by rows to feed in our IDs and give the screens our thumbprints. So technically we were signing before reading the contract, because they gave us our copies of it at the same time, but no one was going to read it anyway — damn few even could. The last people had barely got back to their seats with it when she said: "O.K. Everyone's read it? So fine. This is last call. Back out now if you're going to, and we'll erase your consent. Notice the police vans pulling up over there. It's a felony, ten to fifteen, to break contract after you hear the buzzer. All right, then." The buzzer buzzed. "Time to get to work. Mr. Martini from the studio is going to run one of the APPs through its paces for you now. Best of luck to each and every one of you."

Martini had a waxed scalp and a trendy green jumpsuit — twinkly smile, and a down-to-business voice. "All right, gang. These APPs home on body heat, a standard infrared perception kit. They've got crude vibrational pickups, but they don't mean much in heavy activity zones. George, will you open the truck? They've got about the same mass as some of you bigger guys, but they can exert a lot of leverage in the clinch."

George opened the tail of the second truck, and out of it jumped a big flop-eared dog. It busted up the bleachers. Relief, right? I mean, it was a huge dog, but it was a dog. Another studio man called it over in front of the bleachers and told it to sit. It sat without a twitch. Then George did some keying on a little unit at his belt, stepping back from the truck, and Martini said, "It's on override now, kids, so keep your seats and save your energy."

And a spider jumped out of the truck. It was a little bigger than a man on all fours would be, but with a much wider spread to its legs. It was covered with spiky brown hair except for the flat front section, where all the legs and eyes were attached, and that was a shiny black. It moved tickle-foot, light as a dancer.

"This is about two-thirds speed, and the leap at the end is its usual attack mode," Martini said, and the thing ran straight at the dog and jumped it from about two meters off. "The fangs hypo it with a paralytic, then with a powerful solvent, and then suck out the solute."

The forelegs snatched the dog off the ground, and as the fangs sank in, the dog gave a huge twitch that would have knocked a big man down, but

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didn't budge the spider. Then the dog went stiff, and hung there with just little tremors of its head and paws. That was a seventy-five-kilo dog. Martini wasn't kidding about leverage in the clinch.

The bleachers were empty-quiet. I heard someone swallow two rows away. "The feeding cycle takes about five minutes. They will complete their cycle unless a new quarry comes very close to them, so don't just go charging cavalierly past APPs you find feeding." The dog had puffed up and its tremors died out. Now it started shrinking back down, the APP tilting it this way and that for better drainage. "Each one has two call tags — they're the two biggest eyes in front of the cluster. Tearing either one free will call a raft. Throw it into the raft, and they'll throw you your bonus. A final caution. See the tag-along?"

Probably no one had till then — a little fist-sized antigrav unit above and behind the belly bulb. It started making wide circles over the APP. "When the APP goes into attack mode, the tag-along starts circling for angles, so we don't get too much footage that's strictly from the alien's point of view. It's got collide/avoid, but if you jump in its way, it can give you a knock. A very remote hazard, but we feel a responsibility to advise you of it."

"Stop!" someone shouted. "I'm getting all choked up!"

That cracked the ice on the bleachers a little. People started talking, their eyes on that shrinking dog, and Martini looked patient and let them. It was cold, scared talk, leading nowhere, just telling each other what was right in front of us, trying to make our minds grip hold of it, like hugging poison thorns.

"Two-thirds speed," Japh said.

"Yeah. I wish I been doing three hours a day on the treadmill, Japh. For the last solid year."

"I have been, the last week anyway. You're in shape, Rufe. Better wind than me."

"Christ Creeping Jesus."

"Yeah."

The dog looked to weigh about twelve kilos now, all hollows and folds. Like you could tack his paws to a pole and he'd flap in the wind like a flag.

"O.K., gang! We'll show you full speed now. George?"

The spider dropped the dog, spun, ran back to the truck, and jumped in. You never heard such quiet. Four thousand eyeballs scoping that burst of speed, two thousand brains asking their legs: Well? Can you? Those studio techies had calibrated it right to the hair between hope and horror. I *can*, I thought. But around turns? Zig and zag? For an hour? But with a head start and hideouts . . . .

Some people found a more definite answer than I did. While we were lined up for transports to take us to the run-through, fifty or sixty people

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walked straight over to the cops and got in the prison vans. Our driver standing by his door said:

"That's the biggest walk-off I ever heard of."

"You're breaking my heart," the guy in front of me said.

"'s O.K., they called a hundred over need."

"Extra extras," I said. "Man, you makin' me feel su*per*fluous."

He stamped our hands with our transport number. The four of them would send us in at four different gates, then we'd reboard and go to a new gate. Whatever you'd scouted on the run-through you'd have to find from a new angle going in for the shoot. Everyone colliding on criss-cross paths to some piece of hope they've got squirreled away, if they can just get to it in time. Establishes the perfect *ambience* of impending holocaust, don't you think?

Just inside the gate we turned and drove into a big fluorescent utility tunnel build into the set wall. I kept thinking: *zoo meat*. This phony city in a box was like a zoo — the old kind, I mean. Caged specimens of urban history. This zoo just rented its inmates — we gave a short, peppy demonstration of the habitat's hazards, and fed some of the other tenants. We were zoo food, zoo-bred for that authentic flavor.

And we'd all spent years of our lives scanning flicks like this one would be. They'd been our main brain food. So in a way we owed the studios. It was just common karma to end up doing our bit for the Product, or maybe it was like reincarnation. And hey — what else were we qualified for? Being streetmeat is the only job you can get with a Ph.D. in Urban Horror. And somehow it scared me hollow, this nagging feeling I belonged here.

We passed several gates before we stopped at ours. They got us out and formed us up in front of it. We could try any entry we saw — door, gate, or window. But any refuge we found, we could only check out for ten seconds and then had to get back in the street — the rafts would be dogging us. Japh and I both judged that covering ground and scoping layout came first. Why weasel out refuges you couldn't find again from your shoot gate? We would split left and right, just inside, run the rim for five minutes or so, then swing out across the set, come back up along the far wall, and try to come straight back across to our gate. We'd hunt hideouts once we got some feel for the blueprint, but would waste no attention on blocks that blinded at the wall, which we meant to stay out of. Back in the transport we'd stitch our two maps together. There was a siren. The gate slid up.

We ran out onto a block of shopfronts and office buildings — ten and twelve stories, mid-twentieth style. Parked cars packed the curbs, and as many more stood in the lanes. We

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looked back at the closing gate as we ran. Display screen surfaced this side of it, and its image fit neat as a jigsaw piece into a video, masking the wall and extending the street for blocks behind us. It was a work of art. It was seamless. Even this close, you were only sure where the wall was because the video already had APPs chasing the crowd on its sidewalks, and its traffic was rolling, and tangling in smashups. And no top edge to the wall — projection holos caulked the seam with yellow sky. At the first cross street, Japh ran left and I ran right.

I'd read cities in the eighties and nineties had jumbled ground-plans and no-logic layouts, but they couldn't have been this radical. I ran between fifty-story buildings with glass and steel walls like huge mirrors, crossed a street, and was in rat-brown wooden slums with weed lots, then between an amusement park and a block-long video of beach and surf and spider-pinned sunbathers kicking the sand, then past car lots webbed over with acres of bright plastic flags. No block clued you to what was around its corners. You'd come to a crossing that looked like a main line, six lanes and blazing with signals, but to the right you'd find a parking lot continued on into a wall-video of a stadium standing in a sea of parked cars, and to the left would be thirty meters of blind alley full of trash bins.

Those wall-videos scared me. They were too fucking good, and I tried for a brain-print of each one I passed. I wasn't trying doors till I left the perimeter, but most of the others were trying everything in sight. The fighters were sparring higher now to let the rafts ride herd at roof level. The rafts bullhorned countdowns at refuges people had found and gone in to check out. Without slowing down, I tried to keep track of the finds I saw made, especially parked cars, which people were giving a lot of their action. One out of five had doors that worked, and half those had motors and five minute's gas in them. The rub was the cars *in* the streets. They were robots. For the shoot, they'd start driving themselves into fancy collisions. They had plastic people in them wearing scream-twisted, going-to-die faces for the close-ups. Those faces were reading us the traffic forecast for this afternoon. On the other hand, running down APPs with some wheels looked like the only painless bonus buck to be made.

I turned in from the wall, started my zigzag across the set, trying doors now. I had my pace, and a nice sweat oiled my moves. It was tricky to keep a straight heading because it turned out that wall-videos blinded off some streets in the inner set, too. That really dimmed my outlook. In a hurry you could really start losing track of where the perimeter was at all. I felt better when I'd made a few finds. A working car in a shopping mall's lot.

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A movie house with outside stairs to a working door — the room was bare, no door latch, but I could shoulder it shut. And best of all, in a block of houses with lawns and trees, a cellar door with stairs down to a room with only one thing in it — but that was a chain saw. It occurred to me maybe it was the riskier doors — ones that might trap you down a hole or up some stairs — that the studio liked to put its refuges behind.

When the rafts called twenty-five minutes, I'd already swung back up to the latitude our gate ought to lie on. I headed back, swinging left down a wide street of burger stands, gas stations, liquor stores. I'd try to beeline, see how close I'd gauged the lay of things. If I reached the wall within a couple blocks either side of our gate, I could trust how I'd read the ground plan so far.

In the garage of a gas station up ahead, I saw a jacked-up car and a man's legs sticking out from under it. The legs started kicking and hammering. A spider crawled out, dragging the guy on his back, just as a car turned onto the street at eighty klicks, skated over, jumped the curb, rammed the pumps, and blew up the station. Even before my balls had dropped back into their bags, it clicked that none of this had made a sound. I was twenty meters short of trying to jog down a video street. I doubled back and tried the next street over. Another video. Third try the same. This was the perimeter wall! Already?

The rafts called the return. We were supposed to start following the first raft we saw flagged with our transport number. I could see two of mine, both headed exactly opposite to me. I'd gone looking for my gate on the far side of town from it.

They gave us ten minutes to sit in the transport, rest and talk, before pulling out. Did we talk! Almost everyone was buddied or teamed up. No big groups, though. You'd only share lucrative lifesaving info with a few people you trusted to help you. Japh had gone half as wrong as I had, just ninety degrees confused at the end. We didn't try for a map, just described each other the refuges we'd found and their neighborhoods, and hoped to steer each other if we hit stretches either of us knew.

The driver shut the doors. He used the P.A., his back to us but his voice bright and sociable. "Ladies and gentlemen. Pluton Studios reminds you of clause 16-C. Any props you use for defense or escape, you use at your own risk. The stated refuge and weapons quotas are 100 percent present and available out there, but so is a lot of nonviable stuff. Extras misled by appearances and utilizing nonviable properties are solely responsible for all consequences of that misuse, so a word to the wise. Pluton Studios, in the sincere hope that you will return to work for them again, would also like to give you a handy rule of thumb.

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Team up, cooperate — that's fine. But keep in mind that the bigger the group, the stronger the heat signal and the farther it carries. I'm sure you see the point. And lastly. Pluton Studios would like to remind you that there *is* an air battle in progress throughout the shoot. The fighters are built to fragment minutely, minimizing danger to people working on the set. But there will be those occasional one- and two-kilo fragments coming down all over the area, and there are scheduled those two dozen or so collisions of entire aircraft with set buildings, which are going to generate a certain amount of fast, sizable debris. So heads up, ladies and gentlemen, and the best of luck to you all on the shoot."

As we pulled away, an even bigger transport than ours pulled up in our place, a tractor cab towing a big wire cage full of spiders. It boiled with them, climbing and wrestling and tickling each other. The sight killed all the talk in our transport. All those bristly sensors in that boil, all restlessly touching and tasting the air and each other. You can't turn off the heat of your own meat, can't hide it either. And you got hotter the harder you ran from them — your escape shouted out to them, *Here I am, here!* Were we really all going to jump bare-assed into the zoo with those things?

We drove past several gates. From outside, the set had looked square, but this tunnel took a lot of slight bends and never seemed to turn a real corner. The driver kept changing our speed, too, and when we got to our shoot gate, we just couldn't decide how it related to the run-through gate's place on the rim. Our spiders were already there. They formed us up at the gate, but our eyes kept flickering back to the APPs. They swarmed walls, roof, and floor of the cage, thinning here, clotting up there in clumps and then dropping off like fruit. Exploring machines, groping the world nonstop for a piece they could bite. With nothing better to work on, they groped each other over and over, trading tickles with the tips of the two short legs next to their fangs. You saw them at it everywhere.

"Attention, please." The guy at the gate control used his bullhorn. "You will have three minutes' head start. When the gate opens, wait for my signal." He hit a switch, and the gate slid up.

We were looking down a five-lane freeway, walled by huge videos of cityscape seen from thirty or forty meters off the ground. A light flashed on the gateman's controls; he said, "*Now*!" — and we ran.

The freeway stretched ahead out of sight, but after a few hundred meters, we broke through a wall of color, and suddenly we were running between a mall and a drive-in movie with some high-rises just ahead. The holo we'd crossed was just a faint haze

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from this side, and the blind block of freeway videoed on out to the vanishing point behind us, except that right now it had a square hole in it, a cube of real space full of APPs.

Japh and I ran straight for three blocks to get good and clear of the rim, then branched right when Japh thought that way looked familiar. We'd agreed to go flat out till the APPs were in, build up maximum lead, and hope a refuge we knew turned up in the process. Once they started in after us, we'd have to decelerate enough to hunt hideouts as we went. Japh didn't look like this street still felt familiar.

"That it?"

"No."

"Steeple there . . . . Try left."

"Right."

The fighters just hung in a standby pattern now. Under them the rafts fidgeted around in their sectors for perfect position, or cruised to scout how the meat-stampede was branching into the maze.

It wasn't the same steeple, but the church faced a park that had a rack of bicycles in it, no chains on them. We veered over. No chains, and no moving parts. Nothing looked familiar from here, so we ran to get deeper in from the wall, down a brick-paved mall with fountains. One second there was just the hammering of our feet on bricks as we got near the other end, then someone started cranking steel girders through a giant meat grinder in the sky. It was the fighters' cannons, all at once, and their engines howling into battle drive. And then a gravel truck jumped the curb and dinosaured into the mall at us.

"They're in!" Japh screeched, and the truck blew up against a fountain. We dodged past it and down a street of banks and hotels where the robot traffic rolled at full roar.

In one block we saw two head-ons, and a bus broadsided a transit mix at the intersection. It stunned my wits all the worse because knowing the game was on now had just made it click for me: we came in from four gates, but what about the APPs? Were there forty in that cage? Fifty? Why hadn't it hit me? They'd be coming from twenty gates, and in no time at all every turn was going to be a wrong one. We saw a woman fire up a curbside car and ace it out into a traffic gap — but then take a big chunk of fighter square on the glass, jump the line, and wrap her ride onto the nose of a tank truck that wore it all the way down the block like a hood ornament. Hot fighter crumbs drizzled little holes down through my hair. A guy running ahead of us reached the corner, braked on his heels, spun around, and *wham* — dropped flat down under a spider. His hand stuck out from the legs that jailed him and clawed the sidewalk, and a raft coasted down to suck up a zoom shot. I would've pissed myself at the sight of that first APP, but my water was

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all gone in sweat.

We ran back to the last corner and took it wide, then went pounding down a street of high-rises. A spider danced out of an alley mouth and came pistoning toward us. Japh howled, flung himself on the nearest parked car, and it opened. We piled in and shut the doors — no controls, a dummy. The APP jumped onto the hood, bellied up over the windshield, and worked its fangs into the front edge of the roof. Its bulb waggled and bobbed with the work, flattening its hair on the glass like the fur of a petted dog. Its fangs were oily black with a pinch like bolt cutters. They shredded off the strip of roof. The fucking chassis was barely thicker than foil!

"Out both sides at once!" Japh said. I grabbed his arm.

"Wait. When it's more tied up in it."

The rest of the block looked clear of APPs. Some extras tore around the far corner. The lead guy waved his arms, and they all started kicking at the window of a hardware store. The window caved in, and they climbed through as the APP tore a second little strip off our roof, and then hooked its fangs in around the windshield's frame and strained backward. Cracks webbed the glass, and the frame's corner started tearing free.

"Now!" Both of us screamed it. We shouldered our doors out and dived. Mine was the street side, and a robot van's driver was aiming his permanent scream at me from almost point-blank when I tucked and rolled hard for the centerline, hit it, hugged it, and made myself narrow with all my might while big tires hissed intimately in both my ears. The same instant a gap made room on my left, I jumped up and jammed down the line, one eye out for an opening to break right for the far curb, and the other eye watching the APP launch itself from the hood, clear — by a bristle — the boom of a very fast tow truck, and plop on the line behind me.

I broke right through *half* an opening, a taxi polished a corner of its bumper on my pants leg, and my shoulder slammed a coffin-size dent in a parked mobile home. I heard a fat smack and mushy crunching and saw a robot limousine proceeding on past the spot where the APP had tried breaking right after me through *less* than half an opening. You couldn't tell how I hated touching it to see me run and tear off that eyeknob.

I jumped on the sidewalk waving it, screeching, "Bonus! Bonus!", looking for other APPs and for Japh at the same time. A raft had been splitting its cameras between me and the hardware store and was already slanting down to me, when I spotted both at once: Japh, facedown near our car, and another APP, feeding on his back — and right then three more APPs took the far corner in a commotion

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of peaked, pumping legjoints, and swarmed in through the hardware store's broken glass. And as the raft came down on its air pad with its fat little director squeaking: "Beautiful sequence! Such moves!", I took a new look at the block's other end, and there was still another APP high-stepping around that corner.

"Throw me the fucking bonus!" I screamed.

"Throw us the fucking tag!" squeaked Fats. I flung it up, but had to take off in the same move because my new APP had twiddled his shortlegs and rushed me. "Keep running!" Fats called. O.K., no problem. O.K. with you, legs? "Here it comes!" — this was from overhead. A packet of bills dropped past my eyes, but not past my hands. Near the hardware store I veered into the street, and passing saw two APPs inside crouched on struggling man-parts, and a girl jabbing the third one with a pitchfork that snapped like candy in her hands. My APP was angling out to jump me at the intersection, when a big woman powering in from the right tangled its legs and tumbled it out into the street. Me, I danced. Danced stop-go, left-right, neck-deep in robots missing me from four directions. My brain swelled up and just ballooned away as my feet found sidewalk and danced me off into the Zoo-meat Ballet, that marvelous new must-see from Pluton, now playing citywide.

Panic doesn't quite say it. It was like Japh's being killed had shrunk me. When we'd have to put our backs together in the zoo, I trusted his eyes and sap back there like my own, felt doubled for trouble. Now I felt a dead, shriveled patch between my shoulders, right where Japh hadn't been covered. I couldn't stop spinning around in mid-run, couldn't look one way without checking everywhere else the next second, tried every door one minute and forgot doors the next. I ran blocks I might have known or not. I was too scaled down to scope a whole street, my eyes at short focus and clock on split seconds. Now I was nothing *but* an extra, a scrambling detail in someone else's big screen thrill.

The action got thicker. The APPs ring was closing in toward the heart of the set. Pluton had programmed the heaviest traffic, gaudiest smashups, thickest air battle here. We were running in dozens now, in streams you had to veer with wherever a spider or crashing fighter dropped a dam. We came pouring into the biggest open space I'd seen yet.

It was a long downtown park with a half dozen streets branching off it. The traffic ran solid all ways at once, like a band saw strung through a maze and thrashing to slash down the wall of it. Down every street, you saw inbound APPs and extras, but everyone coming in one street was running to leave by the others. All those pumping legs and arms contradicting each

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other, all their directions canceling out. The people made one big explosion that couldn't spread its outline by a hair — that was shrinking. Spiders fed everywhere, peeling roofs off cars, picnicking under the trees. The rafts skated all over it making greedy dives and dips, like spoons at a stew, and blown fighters salted the pot with hot debris.

The scope of it bounced me back, knocked some of myself back into me. It was mass paralysis in motion. Running into that would be like climbing through the big screen, saying: Hey, boys, write me all the way in. I'll run till the freeze frame and end with the credits. No. Try a door at all costs. Any door. That door.

It was near a corner, a glass door with stairs behind it up to a second-story dress shop with dummies in the window. It opened. I charged up like a fool, right through the blind turning halfway, like the door at the top was the way out of the trance I'd been in — and that opened, too. And there on the floor of a long bone-bare room was an ax. I grabbed it. Heavy! ***Whunk*** — it bit the floor just fine. I breathed. Shook knots from my legs. I was dressed, naked in track shoes no more.

The door was wood, not thick, no latch. I could shoulder it shut against an APP. If it couldn't outpush me, it would chew off the door pretty quick and I'd have to fight. Maybe I could swing an ax as fast as I'd seen APPs jump. I should have an alternative.

O.K., so rig a window exit. Then stay here and run out the shoot-clock right down to the second an APP tore the last piece of door off. I didn't like being the room's length from the door fixing the exit, but APPs had hard little hooks for feet you could hear on pavement, let alone coming up wooden stairs. So I went over to the three dummies in the window. That made four of us.

I sawed seams with the ax bit, but tearing those dresses was tough, and the noise of it ripped pieces out of my concentration on sounds from the stairs. I'd just need support halfway down, but this was a second story and the strips had to be doubled because I'd hit the rope hard.

I could see part of the sidewalk outside my street door, but the big movie in the square kept grabbing my eye. The set was the script, and my zoofellows gave life to the scenes built into it through sheer inspiration. Two guys found a parked bus they could force the doors of, and the bigger guy found controls at the wheel while his partner fought off a group forcing in after them that had APPs too close on their tails to be shut out, but a half dozen people swarmed in over him before the big guy fired up the bus. Then he started thrashing like suddenly he couldn't move, the bus roared them all out into the stream, hit seventy clicks for a sharp left turn that toppled it, skated

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on sparks smash into a power pole, and lay there. APPs started climbing it, its doors flopped open, and they poured themselves through and plopped on the groggy meat. Knots, I told my hand. Make knots.

I was tying my strips now. I saw a girl charge straight into a duck pond in the park, and the APP that was chasing her cringe from the water and sit twiddling at her from the bank. She stopped and stood in the pool's center — What was that on the stairs? Nothing. Knots, knots, knots. A man splashed out to stand with the girl and his APP stopped at the bank, too. An angle there? The dummies' stands were bolted to the floor. I bent and tied my rope to one, and a guy comes hugging his way up the neck of a lamppost I could just see the top of. I straightened, and there were two more guys climbing below him, and spiders at the base twiddling but not climbing. Another angle. I could hug one of those suckers an hour and more. Seven people waist-deep in that pond now, and a whole ring of APPs — and right then they all waded in, and showed no trouble eating in water at all.

Were guys at the monitors jockeying APPs with override? That was contract violation! Or did the water just temporarily cool— Watching the movie, I'd almost missed a little brown flicker under my feet. I saw the last half of a spider pussyfoot toward my street door.

Forget holding the door! Here was the exit, the sidewalk clear right now. I slammed my ax to the window and almost popped my shoulders out. See-through steel! Spider-scrabble rose to the turning, and I ran for the door. My feet were too loud and made weird echoes. I leaned on the door, but they kept on pounding — up the stairs. The scrabble stopped a couple meters from the door, then got busier, but not any nearer, with a scrubbing noise of hairy bulk shifting on wood. I heard feet hammer up to the turn, a scream, a stumbling crash, shoes kicking and kicking a wall, and a long, deep groan that froze up halfway through. None of me moved, but if I'd squeezed any harder, that ax handle would've oozed out between my fingers. Out the window, all three guys had reached the lamppost's neck. It tilted, slowly at first. It dropped sideways so smooth it seemed hinged at the base. A fighter blew up, and a big chunk spanged off the window. I never twitched. Then, slower than slow, I opened the door.

The APPs bulb was to me, legs daintily tilting a stiff to its fangs. The stiff stared back at me, tiny twitchings around his eyes, the tag-along snooping near his face and circling away like a pestering fly. Then the street door creaked, and a new spider noise climbed the stairs.

It poured into the turning, and froze. Shortlegs twiddled tip to tip. The first never stopped feeding. The

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new one wheeled and scrabbled back down. I shut the door and made the window in a sneaking sprint. The spider was hustling away, tickling the air for new business. If I waited now, I'd think it over, so I charged back, opened the door, and jumped

Ah, the leathery squish of its flat little headsection under my treads! Its knees jerked up around me and froze in a hairy nest. Now, out for the bonus and right back in. I'd do fine here. I had a new angle.

But they brought the raft down mid-street so the director could keep his eye on developing shots in the park. Two APPs took the corner, cut me off from the door, and I ran with my money.

They were chasing me away from the park, but not against any thick inflow of APPs now. The ring had been closed, and they scattered back out now as survivors wormed free and made for the perimeter. That's what I did. I gained lead on my APPs at every corner, till they swung after people who crossed the gap between us. It wasn't my tired legs, but a lag in them — others had it, too. Hauling forty kilos of zoo-meat puree loads down the old springs.

I saw lots of what I wanted, but always too much on the run to take it. I turned on a street that wasn't promising at all, extras running toward me just ahead of APPs. Then a fighter dragging a rope of smoke knifed down across them into a brick wall. Then I was looking at a quarter-block hill of bricks with the front half of an APP sticking out at one edge. I ran to it and started chopping a shortleg off. *Whap, whap, whap* — it plopped off. A bullhorn voice and a blast of air hit me together. I didn't jump more than a meter.

"What the hell are you doing? Just take the tag, asshole!"

The director was a sleek little sweetie with micro 'staches crimped to bracket his mouthcorners, waving his free arm for emphasis. I stared. I tossed him a tag. He flung me the packet with a shoo-fly follow-through of his arm. I pocketed it, then he flung the packet with a get-away-from-here follow-through. I took the ax to the second shortleg. The studio cop fired a shot past my ear. The director waved both arms, forgetting the horn now: "Stop that! You're vandalizing studio property! That's a felony!"

"Fuck you mean?" I shouted. "We can do what we want to them! Whatever we can!"

"It's dead already!"

"I'm trying a trick with these things. This APP's mine! I turned in the tag!"

"What kind of retard are you? We can't have some asshole running around with pedipalps in his hands! You're screwing with the realism!"

I had something; I knew it from his face. "You not thinking, fool! These aliens don't see like we do, have

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to recognize each other with these things — say some guy cops the trick and saves his ass with it? What a plot twist, fool! What a cameo!"

He was pure studio hack, and for just a second it snagged him, thinking he might be missing an angle that could jack him up the ladder. He got that sweaty, studio hack look, like he was thinking about farting but scared he might crap his pants. But he shook himself. No black zoo-meat going to tell *him*. "Touch that palp again and you're under arrest here and now for defacement of studio property."

Under arrest for defacement of studio property. Somehow the idea of it just made my brain seize up. It jammed my wheels so hard my head rocked like I was punched. "You gray-meat booger!" I screamed. I grabbed a brick and flung it at him with all my might.

I threw wild, way too low, and the brick punched through the screen of the suck-vent for the air cushion. I was almost killed. The raft flipped like a coin — *wham,* top-down on the street and *blang* — bounce-flipped back over and sat on a car. The crew was flung out — Jesus, what a mess! — but the director's foot caught in a camera support, and he dangled head down off the raft's edge. A big billfold slicked from his pocket and smacked the pavement. And a spider crawled over the top of the brick hill. Hand to wallet — fat! — to pocket. Ax to second palp, one stroke. Grab the pair. Run.

I had more than the APP to run from, and more to run for now. Rafts cut their cameras for setdowns. I wasn't sure how long a dead APP's tag-along kept shooting before switch-off and touchdown on the corpse. Had my donor's been buried? They were so hard to spot. But either way, tag-along footage wasn't monitored; it was retrieved with the units and culled later. I might be on the run this same day, but I could get out of here — walk this cash and split right through the pay gate. But only if no raft saw me with these palps. I had to get out of sight from the air.

But this spider wasn't carrying any puree in it — yet. Or my legs were fading. I couldn't build lead to search cover, or even to turn and stand. We seemed to be out in the fringes, streets nearly empty — but then two rafts showed not far off, cruising for stray action. I made the next turn before they saw me.

Into a blind alley full of barriers and trash bins. I slung a barrel in the APP's way, crouched, stuck out both palps with one hand, and raised the ax in the other.

It was coming in front legs high to take me. It stopped, lowered them, and got all twiddly. Now it came tick-klefoot, gently bobbing. Its palps pinched together to grope mine with their tips. It felt like stopping a tube train with a pap straw to hold off so much nightmare with those crooked

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little things. Its fangs slicked in and out. It arched and hunkered and waggled its bulb. Was it grooving? Did I give good palp? How hard could I bring down this ax with an arm that had hot welds instead of joints? That was when the APP I didn't know about stepped out from behind a trash bin.

It dragged a half-shriveled woman out with it, and stood tickling our air. It dropped her and ran toward us. I stood nearest. I had to drop the ax. It was the hardest thing I ever did, and the fastest. I took one of the palps from my left hand and whipped it on APP-Two as it crowded up on my other side. APP-Two started feeling it up.

I wasn't giving good palp now — all three of us felt it. Their bobbing got sharper till they were both doing something more like push-ups — arch, squat, arch — and they frisked my tips faster and faster. I had cute shortlegs, sure, but something was missing from our relationship. They swung and checked each other out.

Ah! Now here was some rich, full-bodied palp! Twiddle high, twiddle low, swing in a circle, and twiddle as you go. They had each other straight before I'd edged three steps toward the alley mouth — they had to check this gimp with the half-tickle again. APP-One was closer, and I poked it my pair; we twiddled high, twiddled low — but here was APP-Two, and I panicked, and split the pair between them again. More push-ups and frustrated frisking. We swung in a circle, then halfway back. All systems still not *go*. They had to check each other again, cutting me off from the alley mouth now.

I had to get in character! I'd had my stroke of insight into their motivation, but I had to take off with it, had to make it play. APPs themselves made heat-blips in the size range of prey, so they'd had to be given some professional ethics: never eat a heat-blip with palps. But palps made patterned moves that clicked their eat-switches all the way off and sent them after something else. I had to feel APP, move APP, now or never. Back they came.

APP-Two first — I gave it both. Up, down — but now *I* swung us sideways and, as One came up, blocked it off with Two's body. As One recircled, I broke and jumped it the pair — up, down, swing, and block out Two, still eager for more. Better! They still weren't sure, but now they phased into my rhythm. Two came in for more — and APP Number Three danced into the alley.

That did it. I'd tried my best, but here I went, into the movie now for good and final. I only needed music now to dance what was left of my mind away as the credits rolled down and sealed me in video forever. As Number Three ran up, there was the first high horn blast of our theme, and it didn't surprise me at all. But it

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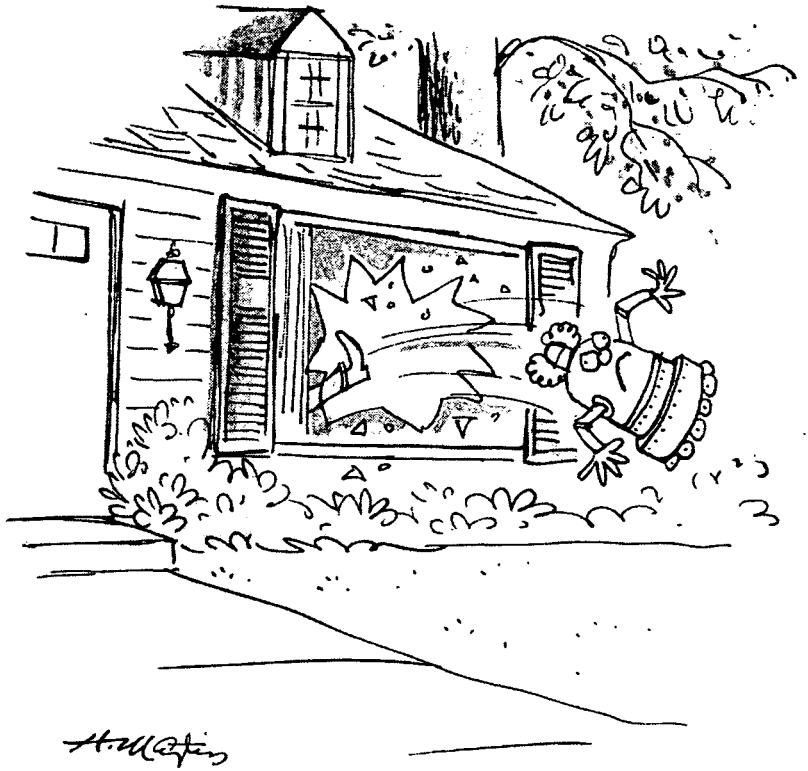
held and held, and all three spiders sagged to a crouch, and froze.

In all the sixty minutes of my film career, that was my greatest role. It's lost to posterity now. I took all three of their tag-alongs and processed them with my ax until they were at the desired consistency — about like sand. I shucked the director's billfold from my wad of bonuses and filled it with the sand, and on my walk to the pay gate, I leaked it out all along the way and ditched the billfold. But the palps I snuck out in my pants leg. You've seen them over the fireplace back at our house. I bet you wondered what they were.

It was a lot to do in the short time after the trumpets called the shoot's end, with all the raft cruising to roust the survivors out of the set, but it wasn't all I did. I also chopped every fucking leg off those three spiders. Just for fun.



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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 42

For this competition you were asked to vary the title of any mainstream or non-SF work to turn it into a science fiction or fantasy piece. Your response was enthusiastic, with quite a few repeats however: GONE WITH THE SOLAR WIND, THE MERCHANT OF VENUS, WATERSHIP DUNE, A SPACESHIP NAMED DESIRE. The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

A TALE OF TWO SIDDHIS

CHLDREN OF A IAZER GOD

ASTRAL QUEEN

AS I LAY SCRYING

THE ROBOT WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

IAZARSMITH

Ken Gilbreath
Chattanooga, TN

SECOND PRIZE

PUDDIN'HEADS WILSON

BRIDESHEAD REACTIVATED

THE PROGRAMMING OF HENRY ADAMS

JOHN BROWN'S OTHER BODY

STARLORD JIM

Joe Sanders
Mentor, OH

RUNNERS UP

ANTIGRAVITY'S RAINBOW

GOODBYE, MR. MICROCHIPS

THOUGHTCRIME AND PUNISHMENT

THE HEART OF THE ANTIMATTER

John Morressy
East Sullivan, NH

THE POWER OF POSITRON THINKING

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROAMIN' VAMPIRE

WITCH MAN, POE MAN

A TROLL GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Pauline E. Gebhardt
Stevinson, CA

THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN 'DROID

MUTANT ON THE BOUNTY

FOREVER ANDROID

Gordon Aubrecht
Takoma Park, MD

THE VECTOR OF JUSTIN

ROBOT, REDUX

THE NAKED AND THE UNDEAD

Keith Ferrell
Greensboro, NC

THE THING AND I (A musical, based loosely on ANNA AND THE THING OF SIAM)

DEATHWORLD OF A SALESMAN GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAINS OF MADDNESS

Vince Moore
Newark, DE

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

BIG TWO-HEARTED FISHERMAN

HENDERSON THE DRAIN THING
Bruce Moomaw
Cameron Park, CA

THE RAPE OF THE LOCH NESS MONSTER

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO BUILD

TENDER IS THE NIGHTSIDE
Bryan Allen
Charlottesville, VA

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD SLEEP

BEM HUR

THE SUNS OF NAVARRONE
Ann K. Schwader
Thornton, CO

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A FAERIE HOME COMPANION

SHATTERDAY THE RABBI SLEPT LATE
Mark S. Painter
Philadelphia, PA

COMPETITION 43 (suggested by Donald Franson)

PROOFREADER'S HOLIDAY: The proofreader has gone on vacation and a number of science fiction and fantasy titles have been altered by the change of a single letter into entirely different works.

Give the new title along with a one-sentence summary of the new plot suggested by the new title. E.G.:

BAR OF THE WORLDS (Martians and Earthmen get drunk together).
NEUROLANCER (The biography of a brain surgeon).
TRAMPS OF DOOM (Hobos leave jungle and attack cities).
THE LISTS OF AVALON (Index to Arthurian characters).
WREN WORLDS COLLIDE (Two birdhouses smash together in a gale).

Please limit yourself to 10 entries.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by May 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 43 will appear in the September Issue.

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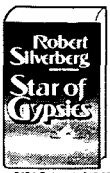

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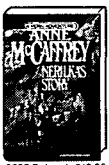

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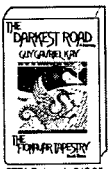

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